

Zuharah

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Dyjan Publishing.

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IN THE COUNTRY OF ENDLESS DAYLIGHT

I. In the country of endless daylight, there was a shadow stalking by. In the endless summerlands which blossomed and bloomed eternal there fell the shadow. In the thought of it, the understanding of it, came a great sadness over the peoples of the sun-drenched lands who realized the terrible boundaries a shadow is forced to wear.

The summerlands themselves had existed forever, or if not forever then in the dream of the first thought and the thought of the first life. For if one cannot imagine a thing to be, so reason the peoples of the valleys, then it cannot be, and so all things exist, starting with the word and with the mind.

The peoples of the valleys having always lived forever here were of several singular beliefs which the shadow found unusual. The shadow itself in coming to the lands of the five suns felt itself stranger and gifted of foreign skin, though truthfully it was only perceived as a stranger in the eyes of those who called the valleys home. And so reasoned the people of the sunlands the shadow would feel more at home, more touched by its true self in its own lands, among its own people.

The shadow begrudgingly agreed.

But its old home was gone.

The peoples of the valleys, as was said, had several strange beliefs. The first of these was flesh-tailoring. Because the valleys held almost no metal, tools could not be carved or forged. Fire was rare and certainly not needed in a land without night. Always there was warmth after all and to hunt required no blade of iron nor wrought steel.

Instead throughout many countless eons, the peoples had flesh-tailored other beings to serve them. Some were mounts used as legs to go where the people could not. Others were hands used

where the people could not use their limbs well.

There were beasts whose entire evolution had been led to the creation of an eye and winged dragonfly-soft bodies whose entire purpose was to spin thread and be devoured by their creators a mouthful at a time, even if it seemed the creatures were not consumed at all.

The shadow watched and the shadow learned and the shadow only sometimes wept.

One of the people asked why the shadow wept and it explained that some of these looked very much like itself. The people could not see it but they did not fault the shadow for thinking so.

In the endless brilliance of never-ending day, the people would use their mounts and walk or take the good grub-fruit of the topmost branches, either climbing or reaching with limbs designed to stretch and unfold like the layers of a chrysalis in decay and some offered the shadow some to eat. And eventually, yes, the shadow did eat.

Among the other beliefs was one in which the shadow found a strange and terrible thing.

All the people regardless of their appearance were female. When the shadow spoke of men the people could not understand the word. Of course, some of the people looked bigger than the shadow but these were but the flesh-tailored mounts they employed. Their true forms remained hidden in the skin. When the shadow mentioned that the mounts had gender, male and female the people found this a strange thing. Until one realized what the shadow meant.

But only beasts replenished themselves this way. They of the people did not. They of the people splintered themselves in a shower of daughters running through the blood of their mounts, their legs, their hands. Their eyes.

Only the beasts replenished themselves as the shadow

described. And was the shadow a beast?

No. No, they reasoned the shadow was no beast. For it spoke and thought. Despite its unusual appearance, it had a mind.

There were other differences though.

When the people would fly, taking the bodies of winged creatures the shadow called wasps, (a word the people never heard before,) the shadow would ask what it felt like to fly. But they of the people already knew for each of them had memories of all who came before. All were linked by the great web of endless recollection and each action was but the further cacophony and symphony of actions made and begun a billion years before.

Though even this confused the shadow. For in endless daylight, what meaning was there to words like years?

But the people knew.

When one sun dipped ever so slightly, they knew their time was passing by, for in the country of five suns one could easily see which fiery sphere was where and know the passage of time as easily as if one could count the ticking of infinity herself.

The shadow too knew of years and time's passing but used a word the people had no reference to. It was called night.

Such a word had no meaning here.

Sometimes the shadow would talk with one member of the people and speak for long hours upon its lost home. The shadow would then mention other countries, some with night and some with many suns though never as many as the valleys of the people, and then spoke of other shadows and shadowed forms.

The one the shadow spoke with mentioned all the varieties of life here and pointed to the trees and even to the sinuous and crystalline waters endlessly sparkling like diamonds in seas of diamonds.

In these rare assignations the shadow, as the people reasoned it, might even have seemed a great seducer, some terrible corruption to one of their own, winnowing between the

trees, mentioning words as night and season and love and hate and jealousy. And fear. And of these things, such words were unknown here.

But the people were tolerant of the stranger for they sensed and knew it was composed of all of which it spoke and in understanding wished to bring together the shadow into their midst and their minds.

So, they let it talk to one of their own, even as time reached its conclusion for her when she would have to say goodbye to all the things she knew, and was, for a final time.

On the day of the return, the shadow watched as she was led to the tree and there as it protested, little understanding why, was she taken from the wasp-body of her mount and her true form placed upon the silvery trunk.

Slowly her body was consumed by it, devoured as if she were sandstone washed away by the surf until nothing of her remained and the shadow was then freed and placed its hand where her body had been and half-weeping asked what became of her.

And one explained that when one had reached old age their minds began to fail and so they would begin to break apart into sad recollections of themselves. But before this happened, they would be taken and placed in these infinitely older forms to sustain the forests and to remain now part of the great heart of all things.

But the shadow protested, she had only lived eight days.

But what is a day to the peoples of the valleys?

Without saying another word, the shadow turned and walked away toward the shoreline then . . .

By the shores of water luminescent blue one of the people came to the shadow as it was sitting upon the stones. It asked her what became of the one he knew, now that she was gone. And she

spoke this last belief of the people, that all creation was merely the broken forms of a god, a being at time's beginning who wished to understand all things and so broke herself apart to observe and be at each aspect of time, so that at the end in coming together again she would know the purpose and the point and the poignancy and the grace, of all created things.

As she spoke white shimmering clouds came whispering by which slowly cast darkness over the waters. The shadow had never seen such things before.

And she explained they were vast colonies of living things each smaller than a grain of sand but together capable even of pushing back the light of the five suns. And in the darkness, the shadow drew forth something which it called a mirror and she gazed into the reflection of herself and realized that though it looked exactly like her it could not be.

So too she imagined now the shadow, lost and lonely and not even here, just a small piece of something it called night, and imagined how easy it would be to pierce the shadow's skin and end the life right here. But she did nothing except whisper some words he'd never heard in a long, long time, and then returned the way she came.

"I loved her too," she said.

II. The planet orbited five suns. In moving between the five there was no point where the light was free to escape the grasp of the planet's gravity and so at no point did the night ever take hold.

The planet itself possessed three continents and a singular thin sea arching between them. The ratio of water to observable land was forty percent, far less than Earth had been.

It is uncertain how to define the native inhabitants' term for their home. But the human ascribed the word *Draiara* to it, which seems appropriate enough.

It was the name of his daughter . . .

His name, that is to say the name of the last man, does not matter. Let me reiterate that. By the time of his arrival his name, his own identity had been partially eaten away, leaving this vast gap.

All other details of life remained though, of family and home.

But of himself, nothing was left.

This would be known as a fugue state, but usually, a fugue erases all knowledge of one's past life. However, the remembrance of things was understandable considering his memories of them were the thin thread holding them and allowing them to remain in the universe at all. And so, the final man arrived on Draiaara.

At first, stranded in the ruined silver of his ship he awoke to realize sunlight was pouring in. He crawled out from the wreckage to see himself surrounded by a sea of trees. His bones were unbroken but his body was cut and so he drunkenly staggered from the vessel straight into the body of a wasp.

Without knowing it he collapsed into the golden-black body of a giant insect and in his dazed state showed neither fear nor terror even as the golden-black body dissolved away and he realized in his delusion it was no wasp.

And yet it was an insect and the insect was staring at him and quite without realizing it thin threads erupted from the creature's body and began to envelop him. Thin silver threads rose and erupted and bled from the insect whose golden-black body transformed into a pattern of blue and white and the man was lost in the maze of threads, and enveloped.

In the womb of this strange infection, a voice crept into his head inquiring of what he was and where he came from.

Slowly he spoke, explaining the fire and the flood.

The creature pulled apart each thought he shed and slowly learned the beast was the last of its kind in all Creation.

Then the insect wept.

Afterward, the man regained his legs and the sensations of his body and was led demurely by the insect to the hive.

There in the blue canopy of endless rooms, he learned slowly of where he had been led. The masters of Drairara were not the insects themselves but creatures buried inside.

Parasitic creatures dwelled beneath the flesh of these beings and not merely the insects but many other forms of life. It was explained to him all the creatures he saw were tailored by the parasites themselves.

Time passed indefinitely for him now. Without night there was no deviation between days since there were no days. At first, he spent his time deliriously moving from room to room, occasionally immersed in the strands of his deliverers.

Then later he went out into the sea of trees, his guide with him. The wasp, or thing which he mistook for a wasp, had become the tender of his needs. When he slept, she was by his side, watching him. They did not need to sleep though their bodies did.

When the wasp-form failed the parasite would crawl from it and take possession of new flesh, always watching the man to keep him safe. In the bright shadows of the trees' canopies, in the hallways of the ancient hives by the ocean whose sparkling waters seemed like diamonds in seas of diamonds, still she watched over him. As time passed on.

Slowly the delirium faded.

He began to talk of the Old Earth and its legends and of the people passing by, of how the oceans had run black of tar and how the deserts stank of rotting cement. And, he spoke of the Earth's last day now etched into his mind, and of those he left

behind. He and a few million others like fireflies had fled up into the dark, leaving their loved ones behind.

The darkness she could not understand. Though she could not understand the word *man* either. All her kind were daughters leaving pale shadows of themselves behind, for they of Draiaara were possessed of one recollection and one mind. These words of night and man disturbed her, as he spoke of days he'd left behind.

She in turn spoke of the beliefs of her kind.

The world was alive, a living thing endlessly renewing itself, and they but fragments of some ancient god. All life was thus she explained, their past lives embedded in the present structure of their minds.

At the end of course, for there would always be an end, all those fragments would be gathered up and pieced back together again allowing that ancient god a fuller understanding of the purpose of each and everything.

Including herself.

And so, she said perhaps at the end his family would be waiting for him to become in him as he would become in them.

Time passed.

Eventually, the man learned his companion was to die. She had reached old age and so he was there upon the cusp of her last day with another and another seemingly exactly like herself as he watched the body slide open as it had done before and a small bundle of violet wires emerge to be placed by the base of a tree.

The beings who dwelled here he knew had no words to describe his feelings. Hate and jealousy and love, such words they could not define. But in watching her pass-dissolve into the silver skin of the tree, knowing all she was now was being obliterated, leaving but her living body behind the man half-imagined he could fight it, struggle forth, and stop her dying.

But he didn't do anything. It was too late.

Everything has its time.

He wandered by the shore awhile gazing at the diamonds in the diamond sea and realized he had not seen his own face in forever and the waters would not answer him this way.

There was a mirror; how had he forgotten it?

He drew forth from the sheath of his garments like the shed body of a chrysalis the mirror, rounded and smooth, and as he did so a sea of clouds came and another of the people came to him. One of her daughters he knew but he didn't know how he knew.

She explained that the clouds were living colonies of creatures, the only force capable of keeping the sun away and only for a few moments. Night, the foreign word, for a moment held dominion here.

He held the mirror to her and she saw it, noticing it was nothing more than a dead reflection of herself. He gazed and knew the same, that this mere copy was the only form of humanity he had left outside himself.

Then he wept.

Then she turned to him and said two things he had never heard before by any of them and in the voicing of them he startled to himself and saw Draiaara as his home at last.

And home blossomed back into him.

She said she had loved her mother, a phrase their kind had no understanding of before but now it was blistering outward, radiating down and through all things, a bright sliver of whatever was best of humanity mingling their souls.

But it was the other thing that brought him back fully as the lone repository of all that had been lost was found again.

She whispered his name to him.

Then she passed on as if into unbeing, he following her the same.

PARASITE TOO

Inside the bodies lay the parasite. Imagine a woman or a man, and buried within something controlling them, but only sometimes, and only when the beast within wished it so. Each "man" or "woman," (though such words would not apply here,) was otherwise free to act of its own initiative. As if it had free will.

Before the parasites arrived, men and women had relationships where each man had four women about him and each woman had four men. Then came the parasites who at first allowed those that they possessed access to all they knew and were.

Suddenly the vistas were opened and uncounted countries revealed and the people of this solitary isle of ground in a black sea were seemingly given the sum total of everything.

The only cost was eventually the loss of their bodies.

So it was that the people were consumed in the maw of the parasite . . . a time.

If you travel the main road leading from the city of A to the city of Z, (the names the people use are not human and their true language is unpronounceable by human tongue,) you will see yourself passing various people on the road.

These people will look like anyone else. They will look to you as normal if you are a native here and if you are an alien they will look alien to you. But because, as guide, I am the speaker you will in your minds imagine them as men and women, given limbs like yourselves and clothing as you would wear and eyes and tongue and hands and fingers as you would have them, which they do not have but because this is being told to you through human senses only human form remains.

Now the road is dusty, the three moons are hanging in the sky, the people trudge along and sweat or at least you would

sweat and so likewise in empathy they must.

Notice here, one man walking. He like many others is most likely infected. He is a great inspector acting as a beggar and it is his purpose to root out any who are not yet bound and so rendered full and truly alive. As they reason it.

Along the road to Z he wanders and brushes carelessly against a woman and then he feels faint. The flesh beneath his flesh contracts and before he crashes and collapses to the ground the woman's compatriots have taken and carried him to a small copse of what looks almost like trees.

And there the surgery begins.

It would be easy, terribly easy to imagine one could simply cut out the infected heart of the invader and so save the man inside but this is not the surgery's point. As the other people mill about, each of them here uninfected the inspector is killed outright and the duplicate emerges from the shadows behind what almost seems as trees.

The surgery consists of nothing more elaborate than pulling the parasite from the now-dead body and even as it squirms in protest, thin rivulets of flesh whipping violently at the murderers of its former host it is pushed down the throat of this replica as the replacement takes the selfsame steps its predecessor did.

And then moves on.

Let us follow now as it approaches the city of Z.

The inspector appears alive.

As it moves amongst those in sympathy with itself it even seems alive. The parasites can sense warmth from living bodies but they truly only see themselves. When they first arrived those possessed became visible and those unpossessed unseen.

The entire population was seemingly infected over time and the greatest part of their success lay in no one truly knowing

who was infected and who was not. Like ghosts or wraiths, the unpossessed could affect things but only half-heartedly for those taken of the parasite would eventually notice them. Inspectors like missionaries would emerge and seek them out, and their various sexual practices and various cultural points both invaders and invaded knew as intimately as themselves.

How would one tell if the one they loved had been taken in? They would act the same or worse now claim to serve these invisible overlords and one would never know if they had changed their minds willingly or unwillingly or if perhaps those most vehemently promising to serve were only doing so because they had been promised they would be uninfected if they did so.

So, the parasites needed never control everyone at all times. They needed but to appear that they did.

Our inspector passes the gates and moves on, conversing with others like itself. And being an inspector, it easily mounts the stairs to the halls of records, examines whatever it desires, and if questioned no questions are needed.

For all can feel the parasite inside.

The inspector appears alive.

But the inspector is dead.

It is a machine, a synthetic organism that has no organs, or veins, or nervous system. And the parasite is now trapped, impotently clawing at the walls of its mobile prison, incapable even of screaming with another's voice.

All plans the machine seeks the machine finds and what is worse when the parasite stops to look inside it notices the ruined body of another buried in the sinews of the artificial design. There in the darkened corner of the body is the ruined body of its own kin withered into dust and obliterated as nothing but a fossil.

And left buried in the ruins the parasite can smell the body of another and another. How many times has this monster fed, how many of its brethren has the beast consumed?

The inspector patrolled rooms where dark wombs were, where pregnant parasites in their host bodies were about to give birth.

A hand brushed against each writhing face, a toxin embedded in what would seem to you a hand though to them such words as hand or face would have no meaning here.

Soon they would all be dead.

Soon.

There would be an investigation, led by the inspector. A plague would be discovered here in the city of Z.

The same plague which washed against the shores of A.

Imagine the slowly rising terrors in their ranks, each day never knowing who to trust. Some of the higher-ups in observing all this imagined some traitors in their ranks, some mad collaborators working with the enemy.

So often the parasites would spend their time wondering at each other, questioning if this man here, this woman there was truly them, or some ghost somehow taking on the appearance of living flesh.

And they would never know for everyone they met would proudly proclaim their loyalty to them and the parasites would never be sure if they were truly being loyal or simply proclaiming their innocent adoration out of unrivalled respect for them.

And because only the invisible were their enemies, those they saw day to day, like the inspector here wandering the streets of Z, men like this all others had to imagine were loyal to their cause. For otherwise who was left to trust, if not themselves alone?

And yet. And yet even men such as the inspector garnered less trust over time.

By the end, those surviving parasites with living flesh surrounding them fled. They took all remnants of themselves and fled in the breathing beasts of their ships, little knowing a small plague followed them. In the dark none survived save their cries

only.

As for the rest, those imprisoned in the unliving bodies of their walking prisons the survivors did nothing to them. They were quietly ignored, the last sparks of the last ghosts of a dying race impotently clawing at the walls, begging to possess and be taken possession of.

But no possession came.

OBSERVER PRINCIPLE, SUN-COLD MOTH

Part of the problem in penning a utopia is the sheer impossibility of it. There is no way to appeal to each person's unique temperament or personality and certainly no one way to so carefully craft a society that achieves all the perfect goals and gains of all our perfect imaginations. Or so this was believed until the emergence of the sun-cold moths . . .

They exist on a small planet in a binary system and since the planet is tidally locked one half is perpetually in light and half in shadow. The "moths," (there is no other way to describe them,) are flittering creatures passing from field to field, partaking of various nectars of various flowers.

Except that such creatures should not exist.

Let me explain the name first. Perhaps that will give some indication as to the nature of them.

Sun-cold is an oxymoron, two diametrically opposite statements held in suspension together. A sun can no more be cold than fire freezes ice. How then came the name?

As each moth flickers about they pass into and out of existence constantly. Their wings blister and burn and are extinguished while paradoxically neither blistering nor burning.

It is as if a sun were born in them and died in them at the same time. As long as they are observed they exist but if not observed cease to exist, at least as moths.

Suddenly smouldering piles of ashes scatter the air and yet when one turns to look at them, they are again simply, subtly, small flittering things partaking of various nectars of various flowers. Only later were the creatures understood but by then it was far too late.

The colonists reported they couldn't ever leave.

They also reported something else, a new necessity.
Someone from outside would have to watch them.
Forever.

Imagine you are the observer.

You are situated in a room. Before you, there is a screen, like a silver skin. This blisters into life and you are observing a street. You observe people, men, women, and children, and the first detail you notice is their happiness.

They are all exceedingly happy.

As you observe them you are made aware that others are doing likewise, several observing the same street that you are observing. What might these others be seeing though?

They will all claim the people observed are happy. But the mechanism of their pleasures will differ from observer to observer.

Let us say that you have devoted yourself to the pleasures of the flesh. You see these people and they appear close, men and women laughing together, some nude, some scantily dressed, and whatever sexual mores interest you now interest them.

I have a list of a few obscure paraphilias. Where is it? Ah yes, here it is; there is the sexual interest a person would have toward statues. If this interests you suddenly several statues appear, either human in appearance or close enough, and where before the people showed interest only in each other now some show interest in these life-sized, lifeless things.

There is the sexual satisfaction caused by pain.

Now their smiles are tinged with a certain lustful agony.

There is the sexual fantasy of being the opposite gender.

The young woman, the blond standing on the street corner, without quite knowing why her thoughts blend into your own, and now you can see her fantasy, of becoming a man.

There are others, lust for trees or insects or tattoos and all

at once what is observed in your thoughts becomes revealed in them. Women now are adorned of ink, black and violet dye about their eyes . . .

It needn't be sexual.

The streets could be arranged in a perfect grid if you imagine such leads to a more uniform society. The man walking or the woman passing by may become emperor or magistrate or beggar or perhaps all designations bleed into unbeing here.

All that matters is that they are happy so long as you are watching.

The total number of observers is over five million. Your shift will last three hours then you will rise and another will take your place and you will return seven days later.

The total number of colonists is not five million.

The total number of colonists cannot be counted or completely observed.

It would be the same as trying to count photons of light. Even if you know the size of the territory this would not mean you could calculate it.

So how did things arrive this way?

Well, the sun-cold moths evolved to take advantage of the ambient energy of their tidally locked world. Although appearing to be insects they are also plants and so bathed in endless solar radiation they are capable of feasting upon light, until bursting.

To escape this gluttony, they evolved the means of phasing into and out of existence. At any one time, a moth lives and simultaneously dies. Now since the organism exists in this state how does it possibly feed upon nectar, how does it fly, how does it possibly even think since thought requires far more than a nanosecond with which to act?

The moths observe each other, a latticework of observation and being observed. The grasslands are endless and the grasses are riddled with eyes. So that which feeds upon the flowering

plants likewise requires the grasses to see them for them to exist, for them to feed and be fed upon by the grasses' sight.

For this secondary reason, the moths exist, when they feed, in what can best be described as an enlightened state. They are incapable of violence and are rendered the perfect companions of the tall grasses and their flowering stems. For those minutes when they feed, they are not simply taking in nourishment for the sun already sustains them. Rather they are feasting to exist, to become for rare brief seconds solid. To become alive.

But it requires an outside observer for this life and living to take place.

The colonists stumbled too late upon this fact and had only enough presence of mind to alert humanity back home. At first, only ten observers were there keeping potentially trillions from ceasing to exist.

In time, however, the structure of observation, of which you are now a part, has become a full-time task for certain people on Earth. Cameras are used to keep watch on the colonists as they work and live. But what is seen is more than what is.

Since each person has their own bias, each colonist acts according to how they are seen, except they are reacting to how one imagines they will be seen before first observations are made.

Put another way if you imagine the colonists are scientists working on the cure for all diseases then in the three hours you watch them you will see them begin the steps to cure all diseases.

If you imagine a perfect society is built upon a return to nature then you will note that now the colonists are plowing fields.

And all of this, all of it is quite real. There is no illusion here. Hence the impossibility of knowing how many colonists there are.

As they are watched they become the epitome of whatever the watcher loves and their lives are tailored accordingly. When

two are watching or three suddenly they branch outward, one man given three lives, or four or ten, and each is different, yet all are perfect.

Now let us imagine no one is watching.

If this were to happen suddenly all that is negative and terrible in them would rise up and before oblivion would drown them all away, they would exemplify every horror conceivable.

They would become as moths burnt by flames.

As such they must always be seen, to be.

And so, the colonists have now influenced the rest of humanity. Having seen paradise through a thousand-thousand eyes new efforts are being made constantly to improve the human race. But most would rather simply go to that paradise they know of and find peace there. But they can't of course. They can't.

For if all left for paradise who would be left to watch them on Earth and keep them from their hells, and from themselves?

TIGER, TIGER

Have you ever noticed trees?

When one first notices them, bark like the skin of a continent, branches like threads of islands suspended in the sky one does not realize exactly what they are seeing. One cannot notice it for a tree is a thing suspended in time, a creature standing still.

Imagine some stalking predator, a tiger in the jungle crouching before a gazelle, soft lopping limbs bent to a pool of water as flame and night stripes and strikes outward, claws and fangs outstretched in the almost loving embrace of a good death.

Now imagine each second is frozen.

First, the tiger crouching amid the greenery, each leaf a shade of frozen glass utterly shattered by the briefest touch. Look to the eyes now, not vacant but focused, all the focus of the world collected to two points of light.

The jaw is opened but not slack, the claws bent forward, ready, the lithe splendour of limbs taunt as wires are taunt, rippling like waves upon a black shore.

Now the hunt. Now the strike. Now at the fangs descending into the marrow of the poor gazelle, her every spasm of pain itself a wave but the shore is not now black, but crimson.

But. As I said, imagine each second in time.

For there are a trillion still frames from the crouch to the kill and a trillion from first step, first sight of the prey to the crouching of the beast. And each of these is not time as we perceive it but as they perceive it.

So too is time to a tree.

It is life rendered to slow motion, the galling quicksilver of molasses frozen, falling or trying to fall, a drop at a time from a cliff to a pool of blackness below on the other side of the world.

That is how time is measured by a tree.

Usually.

On Earth you see them shatter and shower the Earth with seeds. It is such a slow process. I have even heard scientists arguing that most life will choose either many offspring given few chances to survive or a few children given a greater chance to live, and those with their brood die sooner than those of solitary seed.

Trees are an aberration in this, having many offspring while seemingly living forever.

I suppose this is because time is such a slow crawl to them that indeed even a century is no more than an afternoon and they are nothing more than mayflies to themselves, while to them we are nothing more than shadows upon the grass or sea foam melting into the memory of glass.

Like I said, this is true on Earth.

But I have gone to other places and have seen life is not a uniform thing.

There is a planet whose name I will not say where every century the forests are indeed like they are on Earth; the tiger creeping petrified before the gazelle. But at the end of time's slowed season suddenly one will watch the trees bend down or rise and move.

Branches will stretch, leaves will bend and curl, like fingers and fingertips, and one may even hear the trees singing then.

Yes, the trees singing then.

One can't hear their songs on Earth only because the song is so imperceptibly slow one imagines it merely as the wind.

And I have seen the trees at such times bend down and tend to their offspring, seen branches curl and quickly move their young to better places, lifting them from the soil and then placing them in better soil, themselves rising, moving on the roots of their

now working legs as the trees go wandering, blind titans singing,
carrying their children with them toward the scent of water,
toward the feel of the sun.

And.

And should any go amongst them then, any man or woman, any creature who now exists at the same time as they exist, they will murder such a man or woman or any creature outright and feed upon the detritus of their bodies as casually as a child might pick a dandelion clean of its stem.

But all too soon the season ends and the forests return to the nature of statues and then all seems right again.

But it can never be.

After such times in their company I know I will never go again even into the forests of my home without the subtle terror crawling at the back of my neck to know that with a change of time, were we to become in sync with them either they would tear us limb from limb, casually cruel, or we would burn the forests to ashes in self-preservation and leave our children amidst the desert rather than the greenery of our once Edenic home.

Perhaps it is best they imagine us as sea foam melting into glass and we imagine them as statues or rough continents or blunt branches, and not the tiger waiting, crouching toward us always, hungry as a stone.

THE GINGER CAT AND THE CANDY GIRL

The ginger cat and the candy girl light from the bone train there in the autumn bone towns. Her hair is the colour of summer, of bright days melting into the warmth of a womb-warm sea.

The cat is upon her shoulders or moves lengthwise, passing into and out of her thoughts and so long as she thinks upon it the beast is there. Turning back the train like a long thin ribbon of white, rolls and roils up and down the hills which sway and shimmer and simmer into oblivion, only to become again.

The towns to which she comes are withered like leaves scarlet crumpling and shattering, bone-thin pieces of themselves made echo in this current state to what they were before.

She knows not who she is. She knows not the purpose of the place, can only suspect, and in looking back, watching the train like the fire of a dragon's song wonders what happened before she reached this point.

The cat purrs uneasily and looking behind her notices the old scarecrow in the distance huddling in a vain attempt to seek warmth. And, so long as the cat is watching it the scarecrow is, but once she turns away the scarecrow forgets it's seeking after warmth, forgets its flesh of rags, forgets all, and is not there.

As the girl walks along streets the buildings shimmer and dissolve when she looks away from them. She reaches back, feels the ginger fur of her companion, but once she focuses only on a building or stone-riddled street her companion is gone, only to return when she thinks of her again.

Far away she was someone else but then she rode upon the bone train which crisscrossed all seasons and all times and in her desperate hours arrived at the one place she needed to go.

And all she is and all she'll ever know is here and she walks and wanders and hears the echoing laughter of children

who now are not, hear the lusting cries of women rendered dust and bones and less, and the angry shouts of men gone off to wars none can recall or know anymore what they were for.

The cat stirs uneasily hearing the sounds of mice and crickets shifting in the grass which sways and watches her. Yet the grass as it grows from the rotten streets is no more real than she and she no more real than the candy girl, yet the sound persists and she cannot resist and she alights off her mistress's shoulders and goes hunting for ghostly things a time.

The girl fears the cat will never return but she is there on her shoulders when she thinks of her even as the cat is likewise in the grass, like islands in a stony sea, seeking the whispering haunts of things she seeks, and so long as she is seeking them they are there, even if she can't catch them with her savage teeth.

And as she turns, watching her companion on the grass, on her shoulders, she turns to see herself upon the train moving far away from her, for the scarecrow is watching and so long as the scarecrow thinks of her she is, though she is likewise here and there because she wishes to wander in the autumn bone towns a time, even as they shatter into dust and less, and for a glimpse of time exist and are observed, even as they die.

THE ASH LANDS

The ash lands continued forever. They never ceased. They were a grey sea subtly burning or burnt, all coalescing to a mountain in the dust and the distance of a fragrant, fragile lost eternity. The smell of dead ghost fires would linger in one's nostrils forever.

In the sky seemed demon-things. They were winged like bats, black as pitch, screaming their broken songs eternally. Horns adorned their misshapen heads like crowns and their thin bodies looked impossible to be alive. Of course that was the point.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Mr. Caixo asked Mr. Zainab.

"Yes, yes excellent work Robert. Some of your best."

They were standing upon the mountain of dust. Mr. Caixo was a tall thin man. The demon-things were modelled off him though he seemed more harmless than demonic.

Mr. Zainab, darker-skinned, a foot shorter than Caixo, was wearing an old black coat, his hands buried in pockets where he'd left pens, wills, and his revolver.

"Yes, I do think this is some of my best work. You know people are still talking about Parsargarad, but this, this will truly make my reputation."

Parsargarad the prison planet had been designed by Caixo to represent the worst aspects of captivity, an entire planet hollowed out and composed of endless darkened corridors, doors slamming randomly, sealing prisoners in sometimes for days, sadistic guards who were routinely killed by the prisoners and no escape, since the surface of the sphere had no atmosphere. The prison planet was reserved for only the worst, those who could afford it.

But this. Caixo had taken an entire living ecosystem and burnt it. Dubbed Caixoro in honour of its builder it had been a lush paradise but now was a terrible place of torment.

Far to the south were the seas of Qallathrial, one of the names of hell used by the colonists on Thaben IV. An ocean of lava and fire so intense it cost a small fortune to maintain but Zainab and his clientele would pay anything now. To the north, the ash lands dipped into freezing temperatures so cold death would occur in twenty nanoseconds. Again, a massive expenditure but the clientele was fussy and masochistic.

"So, you think this will be the last one, Mr. Zainab?" Mr. Caixo asked.

"No, not exactly."

He sat in the dust awhile looking at the seeming infinity of desolation gathered about their very ears and eyes and tongues. In the ashes great worms stirred, themselves as artificial as the demon-things.

"How do you mean?" Mr. Caixo asked.

"Well, isn't it obvious? Right now, the boiling pits of Tleuriel have been fashioned, right now the frozen seas are made ready to the north and the fires to the south shall beckon. Soon the people will come. They will come just as they came to our prison planet.

"And why? To be punished. To be tortured and scared and brought close to death. Lifetimes' worth of guilt and pain and suffering, all self-inflicted," he added, looking up at Caixo, "but it's never enough.

"There are so many people with so much guilt, fear of sex, fear of intimacy, fear of making mistakes, but this!" He swept his arms wide, "this is the solution. Experience hell now, avoid feelings of guilt later. You want to be punished, well here you are, your sins absolved and then you can get on with the rest of your damned life.

"But it's only half done."

"Ah!" Caixo clapped his hands together. "Of course! You will want me to create something perfect, luscious, guilt-free and

satisfying."

"Exactly." Zainab rose again. "We must have our Elysian Fields to compliment our Tartarus."

"As long as they pay of course."

"Of course. It's what I so love about the guilty ones. Those who feel the most guilt often possess the most. And soon we two will have a good portion of what they have."

"Well then, won't we need these services ourselves?"

"Why would we my good man? Building hell itself is our absolution. We hardly need to know the services. We designed the nature of the beast after all. Or, to be more exact you did."

"With a great deal of help from you."

Zainab bowed.

"Well, Mr. Zainab, if you want me to make paradise I'll need some parameters." They walked down the mountainside.

"Such as?"

"How much is it going to cost?"

"Ah, well hells are always the bigger draw so half the budget of the ash lands."

"Makes sense. But who are you going to market heaven to?"

"Why poor people of course."

"Poor people?"

"Exactly. Hell always appeals to the rich, and the powerful, ah, but heaven, heaven always appeals to those who don't have so much."

"Well, how can we make a profit that way?"

"Because my good man, as the good books say, the poor you will always have with you. And, as I would like to add my own words of wisdom, the poor also deserve a break now and then."

"You're a good man, Mr. Zainab," Mr. Caixó said.

"Oh, I try, yes I try."

They passed by as a worm was devouring one of the demon-things, both artificial constructs designed with neither thought of heaven nor of hell as any guide.

“What if heaven doesn’t work?” Caixo asked suddenly.

“Easy, we’ll call it purgatory and nobody will be the wiser.”

“Brilliant Mr. Zainab, just brilliant.”

“I know I am. But only sometimes.”

They walked on in silence as the dark and the night closed round again as the ash lands faded to grey shadows and all seemed right somehow with the universe.

OUT OF TIME

I want it all, to stretch out my hand and take everything. I want the moon and the sun and the stars. I want to feel so much . . . I can't. *Can't*. When I wake and feel the sun rising through my windows that's when the gnawing hunger begins.

At breakfast, despite whatever I am eating there is the palpable sensation of loss, each mouthful of food obliterated as I savour it. The hard bread, water, few shavings of butter, I try to picture them like vast continents, secure and unmoving. And then I come and ruin them, destroy them by their use.

I sit in that chair and when I leave it will cease to exist, its purpose gone as I am absent from it. And I will be absent soon. So, I eat and sit alone watching the walls and imagining them peel away like ghosts scratching long fingernails down their own sides.

I imagine my skin flaking and each granular of myself drowning along the table, sliding into the smooth fabric, buried, unnoticed and alone. And the more I know this the more I want.

I want it all. I want everything.

I meet my driver at nine o'clock. The sun is this bright eye staring at me while I wait at the corner and he's there, smiling. He wears a nice suit, something suitably professional and I sit in the back and watch it all slip away. All the time the hunger gnaws.

I stare at the buildings and I lust after them. I stare at the street and I want to bury my face in the concrete, etch some semblance of myself into the stone, but I can't. And the stone moves on, sun climbs higher, and the buildings pass like lustful women I will never know as I arrive at work.

"Have a good day Mr. Travaillier," my driver says.

I stare at him. He is tall, good looking but there is a sadness behind his eyes, this subtle sickness of grief. Without thinking I pay him something from my pocket. He stares at it in

mild surprise, tips his hat, and speeds on as I go inside.

The building I work at my father owned. The apartment was his, and my mother's. Strange to think how I've stepped into his life. He used to say we all become our parents in time. As I cross the threshold I am reminded of him; worn and weathered and sad. When my mother died it broke him. I remember him staring into the doctor's eyes begging to bring her back.

"I'll give you everything," he said, pleading, his eyes bloodshot, the room spinning, myself staring at her body in the hospital room, the doctor, a tall gaunt man gifted with the same sadness as the driver, shaking his head sadly.

"I'm sorry sir. It's beyond us now. There is nothing you can do. It was her time."

The last image of him, a sad broken man kneeling by a corpse . . .

"Mr. Travaillier," Ms. Kaserger says, prim and scarlet-haired, wearing a neat green dress, "how are you today?"

"I'm fine," I lie. I stop then. I look at her to my left behind the mahogany desk, rounded like a breast, her features prim and proper, typing away. And before me the elevator, the silver and the glass doors allowing one to see outside as one ascends the world. Like a fish-bowl.

I toss the stupid image away, turn to Ms. Kaserger, smile, and then cross the brown floor, nodding to various men and women gathered, take the elevator, and watch the world slink away below my feet; the last image of her smiling coldly as doors close.

I work. I don't even know what I'm doing anymore. I stare at the desk, have pen in my hand, various people enter, I try to listen, they speak, I try to listen some more, they depart. If I were like them, would I imagine all this sped up, a stream of people

entering, leaving, the same people or different, all saying the same thing?

"Mr. Travaillier?" I glance up. Six hours have passed. "Do you want anything for lunch?"

Lunch? I glance at the clock behind me on the bare white wall. Close to four o'clock. I had been in meetings most of the day. Hadn't mentioned any meals to anyone or noticed my hunger. She had worried. I had forgotten to eat again.

"Yes," I say hurriedly, "a sandwich. Water."

"Anything else sir?"

"No. No, nothing else . . . thank you."

And she departed the room, green and red, and for a moment, I was reminded of our last Christmas together, my family and I. The apartment seemed so warm then. I had been twelve. I had asked for . . . there was so much I asked for, so much I got that the memories blend together now. But I remember the bicycle most.

I had driven it that summer watching the buildings pass by and even then, I wanted them. I lusted after them. I stared at the grey window eyes, played before the mouths of those hidden women, and then I noticed him. The boy.

He was starving in an alley and I went to him and he looked so thin, so hungry. His hair was matted, his breath stank and he must have been no older than I. He sat next to some trash and I raced home, terrified by what I saw and my father tried to explain. To explain what it was . . . to be like them.

I ate the sandwich and turned to glance out the window. Ms. Kaserger had brought the paper as well. The head of Mara Industries had taken his own life, found hanging from the rafters of his home. His servants had found him and notified the police.

I knew him, remembered him as this strong blond man at the beach, swimming in the white waters of the surf. Then I imagined him now, older, bloated, his face swollen, riddled with

decay . . . I turned to the window and stared at the world below.

"I'm going home," I said to no one in particular. Ms.

Kaserger responded via the intercom on my desk.

"Did you say anything?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, "I'm going home."

I didn't get a drive. I walked the streets and watched the people pass. They all seemed so strong, so healthy, but behind the smiling faces they all seemed so terribly sad. A man was on the sidewalk, sitting down, his long scraggly beard yellowed with nicotine. I tossed him some money and he looked up and smiled, and I smiled back weakly and he put it in a coat riddled with decay. I went on my way. I came home.

I entered the door, and closed it, listening to the familiar click of the metal as I locked it. I stared at my apartment intimately then. I could have put a hundred people in here and still had room for more.

I noted the table as it stretched fifty feet long like a small road, going nowhere at all. I went to the fridge and took out some wine, poured it and drank but the scent and taste obliterated themselves as it passed along my tongue.

The room echoed and there was nothing inside of it. And my father's words echoed inside me then.

"I'll give you anything, anything to save her . . ."

I went to the balcony. The wind had whipped up as a sudden burst of ice permeated my veins. And I wanted it all, everything, I wanted the sun and the moon and the stars.

But I could have none of them.

Down below imagined Ms. Kaserger going to her small apartment, a fraction the size of my own, alone, living on a few cents, probably taking so much less than I, certainly enjoying less. Tried to recall a scent of wine and couldn't; the scent of food was gone. Looked down at my clothes and the white shirt itched. She had to be enjoying things less than I, I reasoned. Didn't know

why.

And she would be doing this forever, each day no older than she was now, making just enough to survive, never getting older or even once enjoying the wealth of people like mine.

She could hunger and thirst and never once know death.

That had been the price my father explained. People were so afraid of death that if one made them live forever, they'd serve you faithfully. Forever.

That's how he reasoned it.

"I'll give you anything, anything! Please for the love of God save her!"

"I can't sir. There's nothing you can give. You've made your choice."

"I didn't choose this!"

A broken man cradling his dead wife. And the words of a song came to me then.

"All the money money can buy don't mean a thing if you're not with me . . ."

I glance at the window, noticing the lines crossing my face along the edges of the window's eye. I thought I could stand on the edge of the balcony and jump, but I couldn't. I am already out of time.

I open the door back to my apartment and go inside.

THE LINE

His head expanded then. At first, it seemed average size, then suddenly the brow bent forward, ears stretched like great saucers, the jaw was thrust ahead of his eyes, his nose, each tooth somehow distended upward and downward like the carrion jaws of a beast. One could even see his eyes pleading in soft sympathy as his head burst.

And the worst thing was he was looking in a mirror.

Sometimes people are born who display certain abilities. They are most often known as Lines.

Some philosophers noted the possibility that the universe is not merely implied to be anthropomorphic but depends upon it. In other words, someone has to exist for the universe to exist and their perception of reality is what makes reality's illusion appear to last. To appear solid.

So, when they are born the subtle moorings of reality give way and what they perceive becomes what is.

I've sat on grassy hills watching doting parents walk by, mothers young and beautiful, fathers tall and handsome, except for an ear that had grown six feet wide or an eye enlarged outward twice its size.

The children you see. Their children. A small toddler running upon the grass perceives his mother and wants her to touch him even if she's five feet away. Suddenly her arm snakes out grasping her little boy as he coos. Later perhaps her arm will go back the other way.

A parent will have an arm, a leg, a foot, or a hand suddenly veer outward, grow, or shrink; a little girl wanting her father to see her eye to eye, a little boy afraid of his mother's stares having her eyes blink into nonexistence while his father scolds him to replace his mother's eyes.

There's no pain. I've been told there's no pain. The parents seem more vexed than terrified. The children aren't malicious; there is an odd normalcy to them. One could have visions of mad children causing untold destruction but it never happens. I think there is some inhibition inside each of them. As children, they know never to step past a certain point.

I suppose that sounds blissfully naive.

What would I know about children or their savage games, what would I know about life behind closed doors, a woman ordering a five-year-old to go to bed, the subtle threat of her face vanishing into the folds of her skin? People put up such brave faces before each other, trying to live in the expectation of normalcy no matter how strange their lives are beneath their skin.

But sitting watching the families they so often seem happy.

Of course, such children grow.

At first, they would practice upon their families but then they'd start to practice upon themselves.

You'd see a young girl, barely thirteen, checking her face in a rounded mirror, shrinking her nose half an inch, spacing her eyes apart a bit more. Some truly gifted ones could even shrink follicles of hair or skin, erasing whatever blemish they thought was lingering there. Though one could erase too much. Skin has a breaking point, of which I'm intimately aware.

The dead man's name was Charles Avadhis. Never met him personally. I arrived after he died.

"It's terrible in there, Inspector Madishal," I was told. We had come to this small house in the Old District. I had to step over slowly rotting steps leading to the front door and pass a long hall littered with dirty family photographs just to reach his bedroom. The coroner was already there.

"It's terrible in there," Azuma said, patrolman, someone not used to the carnage of our profession. I had the luxury of

seeing a few Lines when they got older. It's amazing how much human skin can stretch before it rips apart.

His body was lying on the ground. He wore a brown suit and even had a pair of rather nice shoes on. Looked normal. Checked. He hadn't gained any height or changed his dimensions based on his driver's license and their measurements.

All except his head. Like I said skin can only stretch so far, and so can bone.

Murder was out of the question, though we were here just in case. Before he killed himself, he had called the police.

"I'm just so tired," he said, "I did something so . . . it doesn't matter now," and then nothing else of him was left except a final pitiable moan. So, murder seemed unlikely. But truth be told we had to confirm and notify his next of kin.

The bedroom was bare. There was the mirror, a spartan bed, some ugly sheets, nothing else. The bed lay against the far wall, mirror adjacent to the door, the door some brown monstrosity which once might have seemed oak, but now seemed dung.

I turned back and spent some minutes staring at the photographs. Happy pictures of a family, mother and father and him, parents occasionally taller or shorter, an arm missing, an eye misplaced, three people on a green field, boy surrounded to each side by loving parents even as they seemed the walking wounded. When they could walk.

"It's strange sir," Azuma said. I turned to look at him. He was a pale, timid young man, eyes oddly too far apart, nose flaring. The photograph was slightly reflective and catching sight of himself in the small frame he realized his mistake. The ruin in the other room had shocked him. I watched as he pushed his eyes closer together, smoothed his nose down then spoke to me again. "Why would anyone do such a thing?"

I had no answer.

I passed from the picture closest to the bedroom door down to the next, then the next. Always the three of them, smiling and . . . who took the pictures? They could have been timed photography but a few of these were in places where there was nothing to prop a camera against.

Someone had taken these shots.

A friend? A friend who was with them always, who had no trouble taking pictures but seemed to dread being in them?

"Azuma?" I asked. He followed me to the current shot, the three of them before the river of Arne by the lake of Lig.

"Yes Inspector?"

"Something's wrong with these pictures."

He stared at the three of them staring at the camera, smiling. Avadish just seemed an ordinary man in his twenties.

The picture by the river was the same as the picture by the forest, by fields. It wasn't their appearance. It was something else.

Their smile.

"I see what you mean sir," Azuma said.

I stroked the black stubble of my beard and glanced at the other wall. The same conundrum greeted me.

"Alyimhea," I said, "what do we have on Avadhish's family?"

The other patrolman, a rather stout young fellow was in the kitchen when I asked. Without poking his head in the hallway he said, "Mother's name is Caroline and father's name is Nodyad. Married for over fifty years. Died ten years ago. The house is theirs. Charles is their only son."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

"Quite sure sir. Why?"

The coroner had finished his examination and the body was rolled past us then with a white sheet over it. Portions of the head went with him now and portions more would be collected later. Each fragment gave a glimpse of the whole. But since

murder was not suspected there was a certain morbid leisure to his movements. He nodded to me as he passed, dark-tanned skin strange contrast to the white rotting rooms, then passed out of my vision.

“Occupation?” I asked.

“Checked with the neighbours. Hadn’t left his home in years. Total recluse.”

“Explains the decay. No, no it doesn’t.”

The problem was the photographs.

Smiling faces make an oddly incongruous scene. Now I know what most people think; you smile when someone takes your picture. However, few smiles are identical. Less so in a world where one can make a grin extend two feet across or turn a slit of a mouth into a maw the size of a face.

“I need a ruler,” I said.

Alyimhea had one in his pocket. Still without leaving the kitchen his arm wrapped out six feet long and he handed it to me.

I checked. The same length in each photograph. It didn’t matter how close to the camera they were or how far away. Always the same smile.

“Azuma?”

“Yes sir?”

“If these were altered, could you alter them back?”

“I doubt I could sir, but someone with more practice.”

I drew out my camera and took a snapshot of one of the scenes. Then carefully took the picture off its hangings and with gloved hands handed it to him. He took it in his own gloved hands and stared at the young man and two other people in his midst.

“Go outside. Try. I think . . . I think he changed the pictures. I’d like to know why.”

“I might not be able to . . .”

“I know that. Try anyway.”

"Yes sir," Azuma said, then went on his way.

"Alyimhea?"

"Yes?"

"Come here please."

Alyimhea finally came into view. He strode into the hallway stout and strong, his shoulders extending out six inches more than usual. He tried to appear more impressive. Perhaps he was intimidated by me.

"How can I help sir?"

"This place have a basement?"

"Didn't see any doors."

"Maybe he sealed them."

"Not likely." Alyimhea stared at the walls, appraisingly.

"Hard kind of structure to hide." He tapped at the walls. "I don't think so. Walls are too thin here. Feels more like . . . paper."

"So why couldn't he seal something then, if the walls are so thin?"

"Easy to feel where you'd have to thicken them . . . wait? What's that?" He turned his eyes up, toward the ceiling. "Odd. Not thick, but, like . . . a ceiling behind a ceiling? Maybe, maybe a wall behind a wall? Yes . . . yes that's what he did! *Of course.*" The wall began to splinter then. The small bands of paneling collapsed into thread and the thread to shadows and the shadows to nothing. And there was a wall behind that. The entire house was composed of such extra rooms.

The wall behind was thick but Alyimhea had little trouble creating a door. As he worked, I decided to play a hunch. I called Dispatch to look into any missing cases.

The room was dusty. There was a bed, a table, chairs.
And a body.

Resting in the brown antique of an old bed was this withered husk. But she seemed wrong somehow.

The swollen bones, the shreds of clothes, all of it I'd seen before. And etched into her mummified skin along her lips a smile. It was the same smile his mother wore. Turning in disgust we began investigating the other rooms.

Bodies. He had a honeycomb of rooms sealed away. The technique he used relied upon a few basic points. If the first observable wall was thin it tricked one into imagining there was nothing behind it and nothing to support it. As such the thin barrier gave him the best defence against discovery.

In each room a body, on each body traces of a smile. Six rooms in all. Dispatch called back. Seven women had been reported missing over the past ten years. Seven. Not six.

"He has to have a basement," I said.

We checked the ceiling, the walls, but the floors were different. They were solid. Maybe . . . maybe next to the house?

We went outside and Alyimhea indicated something was here. At the same time, Azuma was reporting success, sitting on the ruined stairs before the front door.

"I've almost got it," he said. "The lines have been moved into position clumsily. Obviously."

"Like he wanted to get caught," I said.

"Yeah."

"How many pictures were in that hallway?" I asked.

"Didn't count."

Alyimhea indicated a spot just to the right of the front door.

"How many you think?" I asked, licking my lips in dread.

"Maybe twenty."

"It's here!" Alyimhea said. The grass, each blade of it was pulled away then the outlines of the earth collapsed to nothingness. Revealing the room. And the sound of a woman crying.

The three of us jumped in as Alyimhea obliterated half the

roof.

“Please . . .” a voice said weakly, “I need some . . .”

I called Dispatch and told them to get an ambulance here. Half an hour later she was taken to hospital.

We waited in the waiting area amid old magazines and a window showing the green hills beyond. Alyimhea had gone to make his report. Since it was now an active crime scene a small army was at work. I probably should have been there but being here was more important and besides Alyimhea had made the real discovery. I had just made a few lucky guesses.

The photograph was still in Azuma’s hands. When the severity of the case became apparent a few wanted him to leave the picture in more professional hands but I said no. He was almost finished and besides a dead man could hardly be prosecuted for his crimes.

So, as we sat and waited, he continued his work.

I tried to understand the best I could. A Line had taken women here and then left them locked in his house after he’d done something to them. After he forced them all to smile.

At the moment his last victim was being operated on as her features were softly changed back. Not just the smile though. He also made her nose smaller, her wrists 1/8th an inch thinner, fingers longer, neck longer, breasts smaller.

They all had the same changes done to them.

And I had a terrible image of a man working on a woman trapped to a chair changing her as she screamed, begging to be released, changed into this because . . .

“I have it. I have it,” Azuma said quietly.

I stared at the picture.

They weren’t beside a river. They were in a hidden room. The blue of the river was nothing more than a strip of cloth he’d stretched out as disguise. There were also small patches of green

he'd used to build the green fields.

From the angle, it was obvious the pictures had been taken automatically. Two people were on a bed, the mother and father, smiling. Same smile as them.

He was under her, grinning as she straddled him but something more seemed wrong. The eyes . . .

A Line can change length and thickness but that's all. They can't change colour or hue. Charles' eyes were a singular bright blue; his father's eyes were hazel brown.

The man in the picture had eyes of the deepest blue.

So that was it. *So that was it.*

Whenever his father left, for a day or just an hour, his mother would convince the boy to pretend.

"Be your father, look like him, it'll be okay . . ."

And then she'd take him to a room and sealed inside do things no mother should to her son.

And afterward when he returned the son would still have to pretend everything was fine, and smile and smile and just continue to pretend. And she probably sat by the kitchen table there and smiled that selfsame *smile* of hers, all the while.

The other pictures told a similar story, in reverse.

His mother after all had eyes like him, deep blue. Most of the other women though had eyes of hazel or green or brown. And straddling beneath his weight were women with eyes of hazel or green or brown, who looked exactly as his mother did, save for the smile he forced them to wear, as he made them pretend they were someone else, until their own souls drowned.

And then the bastard would just start it all again.

I stared at the photograph a time then handed it back to Azuma, walked toward the window and for just a moment wished the world would end.

OCEANUS

Imagine standing before two mirrors in an empty room, one on either side of you, and you being in the middle are now able to see both sides of the room regardless of which wall you are staring at.

Now imagine yourself being seen, any object in your hand existing in a series of images of itself, backward and forward, your clothes, hair, even eyes now seeing this illusion are themselves copied and recopied, the illusion of one's senses being manifest, including the illusion of what one's senses seem to be.

I haven't said how large the mirror is, or the room. For argument's sake let us make the room a uniform grey and the walls occupy the full length and breadth of each wall. The room itself can be any size so long as the observer, yourself, can cross from one side of it to the other in a few seconds. There is light but no indication of where the light comes from.

Now we have presented where and who. What of the why?

Imagine in this room one cannot sleep, and can only observe either bare walls or mirrors, and if one observes the mirrors, one observes oneself. What does one see?

What do you see?

You have both the ability and the movement to look away. You can either stare at yourself or grey walls. These are your only choices. If you go to the mirror and touch it at first it will seem simply glass. But then eventually won't.

At some point, the mind given no new sensation will begin to interpret the mirrors as rooms. With the barrier of sleep ended this thought grows until you walk toward yourself and pass through and find yourself in a room identical to the first. And this process may go on forever, walking seemingly forever, never sleeping.

Eventually, at some point you will become hungry and thirsty and once that happens, once the room becomes aware of your frailty, after days when the point of death is almost reached, eventually the door reveals herself and you walk back out into a city you once knew. But, is it the same city?

You have not slept in days.

On streets, you notice women on all fours, their hands like hooves. A child is crying but when you approach her teeth are sharp and the mouth is split down right to the edge of the neck, just by the collarbone.

You approach a river and the name of an old god from some lost mythology greets your ears. You stare at a woman and imagine something is wrong even as she's grinning. You imagine teeth in strange places and her lips are crooked and wrong and not even on her face.

And the city seems to be making you sick since you still cannot sleep and yet somehow you will rest beside the sound of the river, beside the stone wall so like the one you knew as a child lying on the hard ground, uncertain of where you are.

And you will awaken.

Have you passed to another place or simply were you so delusional in your lack of sleep that the Earth seemed unrighted? Only you can tell and only when you explore with a clear mind.

Ah, but that's the problem I have found. No one has a mind clear as glass, so half of what is said to them they cannot believe as true, or worse, half of what is said to us we believe as true, even while secretly knowing all things are lies.

To find any certainty one would have to take the route that one took before, yet to do so one would first slightly go mad. For it is patently impossible for anyone to touch a mirror and imagine another room behind the glass unless their minds are sleep-starved.

Or the universe is unkind.

THE PRIEST, STILL

Having taken the vow his name no longer clung to him. Rather he was assigned a simple number, C1888 which was the initial designation of a planet he knew of which he loved.

The vow, beyond the removal of the old name, involved walking the labyrinth in quiet contemplation considering the immorality of the age in which he lived.

The first impinged utterly upon the second.

The labyrinth was a circular stone etched of small “corridors” which were nothing more than a stony path with small carved lines broken into it. One could effortlessly walk the length and breadth of it but the goal was merely to start at the edge and reach the middle, following only the path.

The difficulty lay in that as one walked both time and space dissolved and reshaped themselves accordingly. Many had entered the labyrinth only to exit the same way having taken only five steps. And all the time they had been facing away from the exit.

Others lost themselves in quiet contemplation and didn’t notice when it seemed the sun in the sky had blossomed into a faded giant and beyond the labyrinth terrible beasts had evolved, things of many legs which had once been small parasites of men. Now was C1888's turn to walk the maze, or walk it again . . .

The order had been created out of the fear of the new age.

Humanity had grown wicked wise so the order imagined.

Machines had grown up and been integrated into human life. It had reached the point where men and machines enjoyed more than comradery but intimacy. And so, the order existed with the expressed purpose of considering how to stop such things unnatural from happening.

There were litanies of course.

Each aspirant knew the litanies which were nothing more than historical documentation reduced to rote memory.

"The civilization of D539 built machines as slaves and the slaves became masters in turn. Hands were used to brutalize and they were brutalized in turn. Where began the wheel? Where began the wheel? Where began the wheel . . .?"

Having mentioned the initial place the priest would then mention what fate befell them, then expound on the singular question of where it all started from. Humanity built the machines and the machines built more, built even flesh like those of men.

"And the sons of men saw that the daughters of machines were fair . . ."

One could, as C1888 had done, pore eyes across documents of failed civilizations. He could glance over all that had been before, wars where wires were shed, where blood was shed. And it was now his turn to divine the means of survival, of life never-ending.

First a step, then another and another as the sun sped across the sky, then reversed course and came back to where it was. And all the time as robes dusted grey stone, he kept thinking about her.

There on C1888 she had been, and he had been younger then, she younger too, and they had spent their times together under the moons like three staring eyes peering through his soul. And at some point, even while staring into her eyes, even while imagining her as real and alive as himself something caught wickedly in his throat and he couldn't go on. And he left her behind . . .

A turn in the labyrinth and a new design.

Suddenly he imagined a woman plunging from the sky to the barren ground of an Earth lost so many countless centuries before. She had been an explorer and now there was but the tower in the distance and herself and from the tower came the man and

with the man came the machine.

He had been alone here, save with the machine for company, a woman of silver skin and silver eyes. And the woman, not of wires but flesh arrived and suddenly the broader universe was opened to him.

And opened to the machine as well.

Thus began the fall of all humanity when the three rose upward, escaped and spread their cancerous thoughts through a universe where never before had machine and humanity existed as the man and the machine had there.

It was the fall of creation unleashed unsuspectingly by a woman, a human woman, and worse none even considered it a fall.

He turned another corner and time sped and suddenly, quite without realizing it, had reached the centre.

And he turned in all directions, suddenly small, realizing all creation had shrunk down to his reasoning and he wanted to split the old ways and the new apart, but in his shame, all thoughts returned to her.

He slunk back then, terribly afraid, came to the mouth of the labyrinth and departed, crossing the garden of white grass as if all things were partially faded and erased by the endless, staring sun.

He went to the shade and turned to look upon his hand of silver and with eyes of emerald watched those of his order try again and again to be unpierced from the damage of humanity.

But all thoughts they returned to her. All thoughts returned to the flesh and the blood and the warm eyes imploring him to come home.

He shed the monk's robe like the skin of a chrysalis and never looked back. The labyrinth seemed but a dream now.

He was going to where his old name seemed to be.

EYES

There is a country I have found where only one fear exists.
The fear to be unseen.

Each room is made of glass as all houses are and at night one can walk the streets observing couples making love in glass houses in glass beds neath sheets as transparent as moth wings.

I asked my guide about the history of the country and he explained.

At first, so I had been told, cameras were placed in each home. Said cameras were the eyes of the state, lording over the people. Any hint of insurrection or blasphemy against the good leader would lead to one's imprisonment and death.

However, something subtle began to change in them.

Before the emergence of the cameras, the people of the land never had any such eyes in their homes. The country's rise in seeing was mirrored by its rise in being seen.

And, as my guide explained, many people hated the cameras. At first. But then they began to realize that all the various pieces of their lives were now embedded here in the eyes, always watching them.

And some found a way to snake the camera's thread back into their own eyes as well.

They could watch their own parents alive and well or watch their own children playing even if they had never been in the room on that particular day. And suddenly being watched became a new way of living.

And, paradoxically, the more they were observed the more their leader was admired and loved, until some discovered the cameras were breaking down.

It had been after all merely a means of control and unknown to the public the cameras were only supposed to remain operational for a few months at most. The state was not after all a

well-developed nation that could afford to watch all its citizens endlessly.

As the eyes began to break down one by one the people began to panic and rage at the injustice of not being seen and of not being able to see all those days now gone.

The regime barely lasted twenty days after the last eyes failed. The leader was summarily executed and his replacement promised that the cameras would be returned to running shortly.

But that promise was made over a year ago and still, the eyes, they have not returned.

As such the people felt naked to be unobserved and so the houses were changed to allow all things and people to be seen.

“And when the cameras are replaced?” I asked.

Oh, they never will be, he said. The regime is like all regimes.

They never do anything good for their citizenry.

THE TADS

Amanda Winters boarded the train as it careened up over the smooth hills, going toward the city. The train station had been quiet and in her dress the colour of autumn she had hoped to do some sightseeing.

Her light brown hair wafted in the breeze as the train moved up the smooth road, designed specifically just for her as she sat in a green chair. There was no driver and no one else was there.

At the same moment, the Tads were in her apartment, getting ready for the day.

As Amanda woke Amanda was making breakfast while Amanda was showering, but Amanda was getting impatient because Amanda's shower was taking too long. Then Amanda sat and ate what Amanda served but Amanda didn't like that kind of bread today only Amanda had enjoyed that meal and would she please make another? And on it went this way.

If one could observe from without, notice the apartment they'd see twenty different women, all identical, all answering to the same name, all doing various jobs, while another woman had already left and gone.

No one else was there. The city the colour of malachite, the towers, the open avenues, the parks were all bereft of human life. Amanda went to stores, purchased goods by actually just taking them and leaving cash on the counter, cash she'd taken from banks earlier that week then sat down and had her dinner in the bare park by the river, noticing the hills in the background, all rounded and smooth and malachite dark green.

Since the end, no one else was left except herself. And being resourceful she had turned a deficient to an abundance. At

this exact moment, her clones were having dinner together, arguing, complaining, enjoying the meal, while one pair or another was off having sex. Initially, the idea had repulsed her but she'd realized it wasn't like there was anyone else around and unlike her, the others had no memory of anyone who was not herself.

There had been attempts to recreate other human beings. All such attempts had failed. She was alone, living in an automated city surrounded by twenty women identical enough to herself to almost be herself. But not quite.

The Tads made life easier. There was the occasional fear that one day one of her clones might try to interest her in something "unusual," (as she put it,) sighed, wondered if that might not be so bad, then shook her head. At any rate for now she had other plans.

The end of human civilization did not mean the end of humanity. Just because she was the last survivor hardly meant she had to descend to some sort of savagery to live. All things considered, being the last woman on Earth was quite comfortable, the last woman being a general term.

She had repaired most of the city and maintained it and was now finally enjoying the fruits of her labours. Idly she noticed a few birds in the trees, ravens perhaps or some hybrid. The plague had devastated the biomass of Earth so thoroughly it was amazing any mammalian species had survived at all.

The attempt to engineer the final stage of weapons technology had led humanity to a suicidal end when someone had developed the master plague but had not bothered to develop a cure. Idly she wondered if perhaps the end had happened merely because little else was left to do.

Humanity had travelled amongst the stars, finding the universe empty of life. They had developed technologies and resources that would have seemed as magic a century or two

before. But having achieved so much so quickly some began to envision weapons, to perfect weaponry as they had perfected all else. And the result was death.

She had survived due to a quirk of genetics and being wise enough, when the plague began, to work on a cure. She hadn't developed the cure in time and her genetic anomaly had been the only real saving grace against her extinction as well.

So, with the proper technology and the proper immunity she had decided to repopulate the world herself. The twenty she had developed would only be the first batch, reasoning that genetic degradation would take centuries and by then she'd have figured out a cure for that. Or if not her then herself.

She noticed a few earthworms crawling by her foot. They had survived the plague intact. Insects, arthropods, and arachnids had all escaped uninjured. She idly wondered at them, crawling, so alien to anything she knew.

One of her clones approached from a nearby store and sat by her, identical to herself, even down to wearing the same dress. Amanda wondered which one she was, 5, 6, 19? She alone used numbers as well as names when addressing her offspring who were herself.

And she kissed her on the cheek.

So that was why she had slipped away. For a moment Amanda had the vaguest realization of something, imagining herself copied again and again, each generation having no real understanding of any being other than themselves, copies aging, changing, growing and developing, having the same needs for companionship and intimacy but concepts like gender having no meaning to them. If one wanted children, they'd just copy themselves.

She idly noticed the earthworm crawling past, looked to the sky above tinged a slight green, and then kissed herself back.

OXALA

The shells of rather large snails could be seen scattered about the cave floor. Each curling body was easily a foot long and when picked up weighed several pounds. The colour of each was a deep dark red but this we later discovered was due to a dye drenched upon each body. In truth, the snails' shells were usually brown-smeared with bands of white.

Finding the shells and the cave were of some note.

Finding the other things though . . .

The town of Omrurion is located half a day's journey from the Capital by train. It was named after a well-known soldier who sacrificed his life to keep the enemy from overtaking a bridge during the last war. Since the last war in our country happened close to a century ago both the town and the name are quite recent.

So, imagine my surprise to be informed that my colleague and I were to be en route to Omrurion for investigative purposes.

Our official governmental role is archeologists. However, it usually does not involve digging in the ground or even finding lost artifacts. As I said the last war happened close to a century ago but before this our country was enmeshed in chaos. There was no central authority of any kind, our nation didn't even truly exist, and so even though our history is relatively recent the history of the land is not.

Omrurion was a recently constructed name for a recently created town. But it was hardly the first town to exist in that spot of ground. Think of it like the chamber of a nautilus shell, one of a series of places all linked together in space but not necessarily in time. One cannot after all occupy two distinct rooms at once. So too Omrurion, divested and separated from the town which came before it.

When my colleague explained we would be going I had two distinct questions to ask.

Firstly, was he out of his mind? (I had a special word between “his” and “mind” which I felt inappropriate to add here.)

And secondly . . .

“Why?”

As I was dragged from my office, my tickets already purchased, he explained.

Omrurion was noted for three very distinct things. Firstly, its position during the war. It was on the front lines between our nation and the nation of our now-extinct enemy. Secondly, Omrurion was noted for its people. The people of the town produced some of the finest garments in the area, using special dyes which didn’t exist anywhere else.

Thirdly it was known for its asylum.

Predating the current town the asylum was a looming black tomb on the edge, just before one entered the forest. It had seemingly existed forever, a monolith from a previous age preserved perfectly as if it were a fly in amber, yet paradoxically being both the possessed and the possessor.

The asylum had been constructed during the previous reign and during reconstruction it had been supposedly abandoned even though according to several witnesses was still fully operational.

Someone was still maintaining it even though no one was exactly sure *who*.

Due to complications of government and the difficulties of discovering all the layered bureaucracies and such the townspeople had no way to access that which loomed so broadly in their thoughts. At least until now.

“We have the forms and permission to investigate the site,” he said.

“And why should do such an inane thing?” I asked.

“Because,” he said, smiling, “no one else has done it yet.”

As we boarded the train leaving the Capital I had to fault his logic.

“Clearly someone has,” I said. “Someone is still running the place.”

The train rolled along passing green hills and broad fields where several land mines and rusted razor wire remained. Farmers even after a century still had to watch lest their hands be cut or they step on a piece of ground which would explode sideways suddenly.

But in the country of our enemy things had gone far worse. None of them survived.

In our compartment, my colleague was reading, glancing only occasionally at the scenery beyond. It was one of Coffelt’s enigma novels.

I personally never understood the appeal.

Certain writers, in accordance with more rigid artistic guidelines, had been forced to pen works using only prescribed models which the state provided. One of these was the enigma.

It was a detective story. We had them before the founding of our nation. My grandfather often showed me such things.

But merely writing mysteries hadn’t been enough. The state required their own unique branch of a cultural export and so demanded the style of the enigma. In the enigma, all people were guilty of something. The inspector would have to not only prove the guilt of one person but the guilt of everyone and correctly ascribe guilt to each in such a way as to be logically sound.

This meant that one could not merely have the inspector round up all suspects and systemically go through them one at a time. Rather one would have the inspector quietly note each person in the case and then quietly arrest them for what they’d done, proving to the benefit of the state their guilt.

As a government inspector, my job was often to investigate various articles of the past and so as an inspector, I knew full well how asinine such an idea as the enigma was. As did my colleague.

Every five pages he let out a short, muffled laugh.

Coffelt was deemed the finest writer of the enigma of our age. And his books did sell. The government bought enough copies to turn him into a success. As for the general person? There was a reason the supposedly banned detective novel was still quite popular, as were many other supposedly banned things.

I opened the pages of the book my grandfather gave me and began to read an actual mystery as the fields and trees just kept speeding by . . .

By nightfall, we had arrived in Omrurion.

To call it a town was a disservice to towns.

Composed of only thirty or forty small buildings it seemed incongruously squat and short as if it had been cut away at by centuries of growth or peeled back by an unseen hand.

We had been expected of course and the magistrate of Omrurion was there, this plump small man in a waistcoat which seemed darkly brown like something a beetle might mistake for merely a larger member of its kind.

We had brought nothing with us beyond a small suitcase containing an extra suit of clothes and a few other necessities. The magistrate led us to a small inn, paid for the upper room for the next four nights and let us retire to our beds.

Which were in the same room. Of course.

My colleague changed as did I, he took the bed near the window, and I the bed near the door. Before we slept, in accordance with our old rules, we examined both window and door and I took out the door jamb we had brought with us.

This I put under the doorframe, using enough force to seal the room from within. The window was examined and carefully

locked. Lastly, we checked for any secret means of entrance.

All this might seem strange to do, save for one small point.

Too many times inspectors went “missing” from their jobs, for one reason or another. The Capital was trying to maintain order over several small areas which had once been entirely different nations. And a century is not a long enough time to erase all those old animosities yet.

One always had to take precautions.

Just in case.

After all, only a fool goes into a small quiet town in the middle of nowhere with no backup, unarmed.

Only after all our precautions were done did we go to sleep.

The following morning my colleague and I rose, showered, he first, and then we went down to have breakfast.

I have not described the rooms yet, at least not properly. Old, wood-panelled, all warm with wrought iron beds and dark tinted windows. The inn itself was dark, the lower room where we had breakfast was composed of stone, several cold stones rounded and placed together, lockstep smooth, and our breakfast consisted of bacon, eggs and snail. All had been cooked thoroughly. He ate first, waiting twenty minutes while we talked about nothing important, then noticing no signs of poisoning I ate second.

After this the magistrate appeared and we made our way to the purpose of our trip.

To the asylum.

It truly was massive, a singular black stone like an uncut shard of obsidian shadowing over everything else here.

Several of the townspeople had gathered together by the gates and walls to look upon it. The rusted locks had already been cut but without the documentation which we had no one was

allowed inside.

“Has the staff been informed of our arrival and visit?” my colleague asked.

“How could they be?” the magistrate asked.

Smiling, knowing full well the answer my colleague stepped toward the rusted gates and pushed them open. It would be a cliché to say they squeaked but they did. They rustled like broken-down clanking bars and we walked forward, he and I, the magistrate following.

The asylum was lit, several windows showing lights within, but otherwise, the grounds and the entire building seemed deserted.

“Well, let’s get started,” my colleague said to me and so we then walked toward the main entrance.

It was about halfway to the main entrance that I realized the magistrate had turned and run back. I saw him reach the rusted gates and heard him wish us good luck.

My colleague turned and saw him and the others gathering there, various small clusters of people huddling together, looking nothing so much like groups of coral or sea anemones wafting in the currents of the sea.

It was strange to think of them like that and yet the image struck me as being entirely appropriate.

And so alone he and I opened the main entrance and went inside.

Asylums are meant to house the disturbed and the sick.

In the previous two centuries, this had meant buildings whose main function was little more than prisons.

More modern notions of mental illness had created far more stable means of housing the unwell. Far more humane. Say what you will about the state but our medical facilities are some of the most modern imaginable. Having worked in a few I know.

The Omrurion asylum however was something else altogether.

I had expected to find someone waiting for us. Either a patient or a doctor. But no one was there.

The logical explanation was no one was here and the asylum had been simply abandoned. Except.

“No dust,” he said. Glancing down first, then bending down he rubbed his finger against the floor. It was clean. The floor had been dusted.

There was a small table by the door and this too was dust free. Corridors extended in three directions, one ahead of us and one on each side.

Before doing anything else I reached out and grabbed his hand, his fingers locking with my own. We then decided to take the left corridor, the one closest to him. It should have been dark, lightless.

Instead, the entire building was brightly illuminated inside.

Still holding hands, (odd thing to do except you’d be surprised how easy it is to get separated if the lights failed,) we proceeded down the corridor. There were rooms on our right side. Patients’ quarters. Each white room had a bed, a table and a chair. We entered in, or rather he entered, I staying outside still holding his hand, as he looked about.

Clean.

All utterly clean and polished. The room had been well-maintained. It was as if someone had just been here and left only a few seconds before we arrived.

Already I had drawn my firearm. He had done the same.

“Let’s move on,” he said, still maddeningly smiling.

Twenty-five rooms. Assuming the same parameters for the other side fifty rooms along both corridors. Assuming the asylum to be five storeys, (it seemed such a size,) then even if no other

rooms existed save along these hallways there might have been 250 rooms total.

Except, as we returned the way we came and explored the middle hallway more rooms greeted us. Not 250 rooms. More. Much more.

We reached the stairs and ascended them, eventually finding on the second floor the doctors' offices. My colleague sat at the desk of the lead psychiatrist while I went over some of the doctors' notes.

We were no longer holding hands since we were in a single room with a single door, no windows and several filing cabinets about us. If anything was to attack it would have only one way in.

"Reports are in immaculate order," he said. "A doctor . . . where is it? Oh, what's his name? Ah yes, Mopundra, he has here his report on the patients. Schizophrenia, depression, he even has them taking the right medications for it."

"List of patients. It's all perfectly typed. There's no dust," I said. "And these pages look pristine. Like they were only made a few days ago."

My colleague stared up into space for a moment, thinking. I'd seen that look before. It either meant we were in trouble or he had hit upon an elegant solution.

"Could be a trap," he said, half-whispering, as if caught between two states of mind, "could be we were led here by the townspeople to reach this point and then be killed. Could be a town with a dark secret, one of those, hmmm?"

"Except they didn't ask us to come. You volunteered us. And if they wanted to kill us, why didn't they follow us in?"

"Very true, well I thought I had . . ." then he turned to look at the pages in his hand, dropped them to the table, and rose, very, very slowly.

"What is it?" I asked.

He pointed to the date.

On the top heading of the medical report was the date. I hadn't noticed it. It was over a century ago. I checked the report in my own hands and it was the same. Yet the pages looked perfectly preserved, unchanged.

I went into the filing cabinets and went over the reports. I was looking for when the last date was.

Here. The last reported date was indeed a century ago.

It was one of Mopundra's files.

He was writing about making a discovery. A sub-basement had been opened, something hidden from the rest of the asylum. Why was this added to a medical report?

I read out loud, "Patients' responses: since the opening of the sub-basement three days before there is noticeable anxiety and panic amongst all patients, regardless of previous psychological condition. Staff are also noting increased anxiety. Dr Mopundra, (here writing in the third person,) so far seems immune to these effects. It is the recommendation of Dr. Mopundra that the sub-basement be sealed until further investigation . . ." And here it stopped.

I handed the document to my colleague who read it and then put it carefully on the perfectly preserved mahogany table.

"What do you think is down there?" he asked.

"Nothing good," I said.

"I agree. Let's go back and prepare. I don't want to spend another minute longer here than I have to."

With that, we fled.

The townspeople had been waiting. When we returned the magistrate asked what we found. The truth seemed plausible enough in this circumstance.

"But where are the patients then?" he asked. "Where are the doctors? We've seen people here at night. You yourselves said

the lights are on. Where did everybody go?"

"We'll find out," my colleague said. "Give us time."

Back at the inn, our meal consisted of bread, snail and beer. Before I bit into anything I took a closer look at the snail.

"Where do you catch these?" I asked the barkeep.

"The local river."

"Are there many?"

"Oh yes. We use their bodies in our dying process. That's the secret of our success."

Before doing anything I surreptitiously put my hand over my colleague's meal and shook my head. The earlier breakfast had also involved snails. There had been no sign of any poisoning but something about two meals using this organism unnerved me.

It simply didn't taste right to me.

"Do you have snails with every meal?" I asked.

"Most every, yes. Why?"

"Just give us the bread," I said, "my colleague mentioned not feeling well," at this he nodded and tried his best to look sickly, "and in sympathy, I don't want to eat something so marvellous when he can't."

"Of course." The burly man took both our plates and returned shortly with bread. Just to be safe I cut it carefully to see if there was anything extra inside.

There wasn't.

We ate quietly and when everyone else was out of earshot we talked.

"It has to involve the sub-basement," I said.

He nodded in agreement.

"Maybe we should leave," he whispered. "Perhaps I made a mistake."

At this, I turned to look at him in surprise. You must understand my colleague rarely if ever admitted to making mistakes so saying this was the most shocking thing I'd

encountered all day.

"Surely what we saw there didn't frighten you that much."

"We didn't see anything and that's the problem. I expected some broken-down building. But everything was pristine. You were right, someone has been tending this place for a long time. We're not really the first ones."

"We knew that before."

"True. But something else." He pressed his fingers together, touching his lips as if deep in thought. "Those medications I mentioned. The ones the doctor wrote about."

"Yeah."

"I know for a fact two of them only came onto the market ten years ago. So how did a man writing a century ago know what they were and how to use them?"

I was at a loss for words. I had noticed the same thing but pushed it out of my mind. Pushed it away until now when it could be addressed properly.

"The only reasonable answer is that the documents are modern," I said.

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. But if modern, who wrote them? It's not these townspeople. Most of them can't read. I checked. It ain't the magistrate. You saw him. He ran before ever getting in there and that was no act. If the people here didn't make the documents *who did?*"

"We could wait," I said. "By telegraph, we could have a whole team here in a few days."

"I already did that while you were showering. But that doesn't mean we have to stay."

I then stared at my colleague carefully. First admitting he was wrong and now having admitted he sent for backup. Was this even the man I knew?

"Are you alright?" I asked. "Is something wrong with you?"

"Yeah, yeah something's wrong." He looked tired then. "I just, after we left, I started to feel . . ."

His head drooped and I caught him before he fell. It had been an act, him being sick. Or, at least it had been act until now.

With the barkeep's help, I got him to bed, placed the door jamb carefully into place, checked the windows, went over to the desk and began my report.

But first I took out the small two-way radio in our suitcase, the one designed to look like a small book, and radioed headquarters.

I explained to Central what was happening, how our little exploration of an asylum had suddenly gone pear-shaped. I also made sure to confirm if a backup team was coming. It was. My colleague had indeed requested it while I had been showering.

"Did he say why?" I asked.

"No." There was worry in her voice as she said this. She knew my colleague too. "But the team will be there by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"When he asked, we knew it was serious."

"How many?"

"Four."

Four.

"Okay." I gave her the address of the inn. I wasn't leaving him until he woke up. "I'll be here."

"One last thing."

"Yes?"

"He mentioned medication."

"Yeah, modern medication being used a century before. An anachronism."

"Yeah, he wanted me to tell him the source of the medications. Where they came from."

"Okay. So?"

"Well, they're both derived from snails . . ." At that

everything she said after seemed to drift into unbeing. After she finished, I went to write my report, only to realize an hour later I hadn't written anything at all.

I stumbled to bed and slept. Unsoundly.

There was a knock at the door.

I awoke, hastily went, removed the door jamb and saw four of my colleagues before me. I hadn't dressed yet but that hardly mattered.

My colleague on the bed was still struggling in his sleep.

The four entered and a woman I knew to be a doctor went over to him carefully, checking his vital signs. She had a bag with her and injected him with something. After another hour he awoke.

Due to various bureaucracies, I can't give their names unless I want to be shot so I'll just call them A, B, C and D. A was the doctor who treated my colleague. B was the team leader. C was an archeologist like myself. D was a weapons and munitions expert. Having seen his arsenal, he lived up to the name.

While A and my colleague were upstairs the four of us went down to have breakfast. I explained what was now officially off the menu and we began to make our plans.

"You believe that all of this ties together with a sub-basement," B said.

I nodded and bit into some bread.

"Do you think the townspeople are in on this?"

"I don't know what this is," I explained. "Our assignment was to have simply been to open up the asylum. Nothing that's happened so far has made sense."

D looked over the stony room carefully then rose and went outside.

"Should we follow?" I asked.

"Nah, D is just going on walkabout. It's his thing. He'll be

back."

"What I don't get," C said, "is why this asylum is still standing. I saw it on the train, briefly. It looks half broken down now."

"Yeah, well we were in there and it's not broken down."

B took a long look at the bread and then asked an odd question I hadn't thought about.

"What colour was the light?" he asked.

"Colour?"

"Yeah, was it white or blue or yellow . . .?"

And I thought about it a moment and then said, "kind of whitish-yellow. Why?"

"Whitish-yellow. Yellow, like urine, or like gold?"

"Does it matter?"

B stared at me intently and I knew then. Yes, it mattered.

"I suppose it was urinelike. But it was hard to tell . . ."

"Because it was mostly white. Tell me, when you were there, did it hurt your eyes?"

I thought a moment.

"No, our eyes seemed fine."

"Interesting."

A came down the stairs then, my colleague following.

They sat and ordered some bread. By now the barkeep didn't complain about the unusual order.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Our friend here was poisoned last night," A said.

"The snails."

"No, not snails."

"Let me guess," B said to A, "it was mortasheen poisoning, wasn't it?"

"Yes, how did you know that?"

"Because this bread is derived from mortasheen."

I stared at the bread as did everyone else. The bread was

poisonous. As B said this he bit into the bread. I was about to stop him but he put up his hand.

"It's alright. Barkeep!"

The barkeep went over to us and B ordered something I hadn't wanted to eat.

Five minutes later we were all eating snails.

"Why wasn't I affected?" I asked after breakfast.

"Affects different people differently. They're like land mines. One wrong step . . ."

"So, we can add poisonous bread to the list of things that don't make sense," C said.

"Nah. No, I think a lot of things are starting to make sense." B rose and went to my colleague and whispered something in his ear. My colleague's eyes widened and he turned to look at B.

Then B sat and my colleague whistled.

"If you're right," my colleague said.

"Right about what?" I asked.

"Don't," B said. "Not yet. I'm telling him only because if I'm wrong, I don't want to look like an idiot. If I'm right . . ."

"Don't worry," A said, "he does this all the time."

"Is he usually wrong?"

"How can we tell?"

Of course. Two strangers talking having no real connection to each other. My colleague could have said B knew the answer to the whole mystery and whatever answer he gave B could then deny having made it.

D had returned by now.

"So," D said, "what's the plan?"

The plan was this: the entire team was going back to the asylum to investigate the sub-basement. D would provide everyone with proper weaponry and lights if needed. Myself, my colleague and C were needed to investigate anything of historic

interest while A and D would provide defence, (A wasn't just a doctor,) while B would coordinate.

If correct all the relevant answers would be found.

If not correct . . .

"Let's get started," B said.

As we prepared to re-enter the asylum a thought struck me.

"When was my colleague poisoned?" I asked A.

"Mortasheen poisoning usually takes place three hours after ingestion."

But that was impossible. He had the bread at breakfast and then ate at night, getting sick moments afterward.

If he had been poisoned before it would have been . . . during the time at the asylum.

Before we went in, we carefully affixed gas masks to our faces. I turned to see everyone now looking as if the heads of large insects adorned their bodies. Great black eyes like those of an enormous fly greeted me on every side. The townspeople were behind us. Through the film of these artificial eyes, the people looked even less human than before. They seemed to be swaying at unnatural angles. As if they didn't even have bones . . .

"Let's go in," B said, D and A leading. Guns drawn.

Again, the brightly lit corridors and again the dustless floors.

But B wasn't looking at the floors. He was looking at the walls. My colleague was beside him. Whatever secret he had been told had made him smile again. I could hear the pleasure in each word he spoke.

"Look," B said, "I was right."

I went over and stared at the white walls. What about the walls was so impressive to them?

"Do you see it?" B asked A.

"No," A said, "I don't see anything special about a bare wall."

"Check the black light," B said.

It was a new invention, a means of seeing invisible things. A drew out a small rectangular machine from her bag and light shimmered from it.

"Doesn't it have to be dark for this to work?" I asked.

"Yes, it does. And yes, it is."

The black light shone against the walls and I saw it then. Streaks, paths like something crawling along the walls. The light was aimed at the floor and likewise was a crawling pathway there. So too the ceilings.

Something massive crawling over everything.

"Guns drawn," B said. "We're going down."

There was an elevator near the centre of the building. Not being idiots, we knew there had to be stairs near it leading downward as well. The worst thing we could have done was take a most likely nonfunctional cage down to an unknown danger with no hope of escape.

With stairs, the danger was lessened but not extinguished.

D and A were the lead, B and the rest behind them. I had no idea what was so important or how any of these disparate pieces made sense. But for some reason, it had been the colour of the light which had tipped B off.

The basement was as one would expect, bare, full of broken pieces of machinery and furniture. The sealed sub-basement was located near the end of a dark hallway.

Except it wasn't dark at all.

I imagined all this to be in darkness, in fact with my mask on I subconsciously imagined we had stumbled into night, but we hadn't. The entire basement was as bright as everything else.

So too the sub-basement below it.

"Tell me," B said to me, "do you know where mortasheen

comes from?"

"Can't say I do, no."

"It's a fungus. Like argot. It's why we're wearing masks. I don't want anyone else exposed."

"But the entire building is pristine. We've seen no signs of dust or mildew."

"I know. It's because it's continuously being eaten. By them."

The sub-basement was a small hidden chamber about half as big. The light was the same but that was impossible. There were no lamps here . . . I turned to look at the basement we had just passed through.

There were no lamps in the basement either.

Yet there was light.

"You're starting to figure it out," B said. My colleague nodded. I could feel him grinning in all this.

"If there's no lamps where's the light coming from?"

"It's from them. They're making it."

"And who is them?"

We had arrived at the end of the sub-basement and there was the cave. Upon the floor of the cave were the giant snails I had mentioned earlier.

As I picked up one of the snail shells I felt movement inside. A carefully took it from my hands and put it on the ground and we all watched as the body of an enormous snail erupted from the shell and began to crawl about.

Its body was almost translucent. Two stalks of eyes rose and serrated alien jaws emerged. It crawled toward me and I had half a mind to shoot it but my colleague stopped me.

"Wait," he said. The great pulsating thing licked at my boot and then quietly went over to some of the others who were still sleeping.

"These creatures caused the poisoning?" I asked.

"You have it backward," my colleague said. "These things are preventing the poisoning."

"And not just those," B said.

As he spoke D laid out some charges. I assumed they were going to kill the creatures but the charges were not explosives. With a push of a button, small clouds of gas were released. The other snails awoke and came toward the clouds. C and I moved aside as we watched them eat.

"It's mortasheen," B explained. "Concentrated form."

"And they're eating it."

"Yes. Let's move back. Give them lots of room."

We left the sub-basement and returned to the basement, then ascended the stairs.

I talked with my colleague for a moment.

"If this was already known what are the guns for?"

"The bigger ones," my colleague said. "In case they aren't so friendly as their infants."

I had it then. Those translucent creatures below were in a nursery, which meant . . .

At the top of the stairs, D stopped.

"Problem?" B asked.

"Movement. It's gotten dark out by now."

"That's not right. Nightfall should be another three hours away."

"Yeah, well, it's dark now."

He was right. Through the windows, it was clearly night outside.

"How bad is this?" A asked.

"Very. It means we've got to move *now*." So saying, B pointed to the way we came but didn't run. He didn't shout or scream but whispered. And we didn't rush. We walked, briskly, carefully, and all the time B kept looking at the ceiling. And as I did, I began to make a terrible discovery.

There were no lamps but there *was* light. It was impossible to see the sources of the lights properly. And how often does anyone look at a lamp down a long corridor where all your fears are focused upon the rooms to either side?

But the lights were not lights.

It was them. I hadn't seen mortasheen before in its native environment. It looked like a thin carpet of vines and all the time it was spreading spores. The lights were them, the fungus, photoluminescent things attempting to poison us with every step.

But why were we afraid of them now? Now when it was supposedly getting . . .

I felt the vibration before I realized what it was.

It was clawing. It was the feel of *something* crawling upward from below.

The sub-basement was nothing more than one of their nests. How many were there below? How many other chambers where they waited for the sun to fall?

I turned to look at the stairs and I saw a massive arm curl about the wall and a finger pointing at me.

No. Not a finger or an arm.

It was one of their eyestalks.

We stopped then and all eyes turned to see our way blocked. A wall was in our path. A wall of brown with streaks of white embedded in it.

It was one of their shells. It was larger than all of us.

And it was the only way out.

Quickly B pointed to a side corridor as the vibrations continued.

We passed around it and came into one of the patients' quarters. D drew out a small ordnance, rushed out of the room, rushed back in, braced himself, the rest of us doing likewise as a small explosion was heard.

We ran out of the corridor to see the shell had been pierced

open and the snail dead.

We had to move through it then. I had to move through the pulsating green-white body and its alien organs to come out the other side as we reached the door, I the last one, I the one to seal the creatures behind.

Then we rolled into the grass shaking the putrescence from off our bodies and made our way outside toward the rusted gates and the townspeople, still utterly uncertain as to what lay inside.

"I have bad news," B said to the magistrate. And he told him then a portion of what he told the rest of us.

(It had been a solar eclipse. That had been the cause of the darkness. In all our planning something so obvious slipped everyone's grasp.)

The denizens of the town of Omrurion made three discoveries that week we visited them, each of which would have been enough to break any man.

First the bad news.

There had been an infectious agent in the asylum. Said agent had been responsible for the asylum being abandoned over a century before. It had caused anxiety, and panic, and would have caused death. It also caused hallucinations.

But hallucinations did not explain away the notes of Dr. Mopundra.

What did explain the notes was his origin. His family was from the enemy's side during the war. The drugs he prescribed were drugs well known to our enemies and lost during the last days when fire rained down across the sky.

The fact that both drugs used the same name wasn't surprising. Both drugs took their names from the same genus of animal. It would be like two countries both being surprised children used words like "mother" and "father" in both tongues.

So, as I said, or as was said to me, the bad news had been

an infectious agent.

The good news had been that cleanup of said infectious agent had started almost immediately. The mortasheen had been released from the hidden chamber below. This had attracted the native species of snail to make their residency in the asylum, feeding on ever-expanding numbers of the fungi.

Growing as a result.

The new strain was quite resilient even to predation. Even after a century, the mortasheen survived, which was the reason D hadn't blasted a hole in the wall. The fungus had been able to spread and infest the town. One explosion and a good gust of wind could have spread it a lot farther, to places without an inbuilt immune system.

Leading to the other news, which I couldn't tell was good or bad.

"The other news," as B explained to us, after somewhat explaining a sanitized version to the magistrate, "is this. The townspeople are the descendants of those who dwelled in the asylum. The mortasheen would have started working pretty quickly so I imagine the doctors released their patients as quickly as possible."

"Meaning that all the people here are the descendants of the mentally ill, the deranged, and the disturbed," C said.

"No," B said simply.

"No," my colleague echoed.

"What do you mean no?" C asked. "If the mortasheen killed the townspeople then that would only leave the dwellers of the asylum. And since only the dwellers of the asylum are left, they have to be the ones who repopulated the town."

"Exactly," B said. "The dwellers of the asylum. Not the ones who lived in the asylum."

"What's the difference?"

And then I understood it. The small clustering of people

huddled together looking like colonies of coral or sea anemones, wafting in the sea currents, rhythmically moving, back and forth, bonelessly . . .

"The snails kept getting larger with each feeding," I said, "and with each feeding, they had to evolve new ways to survive."

"Especially surrounded by dangerous predators. You know, I stumbled on the answer when I asked about the lights," B said. "Mortasheen becomes luminescent when saturated to a single spot, like here. The thing is, even with the creatures working constantly no one within twenty miles would be completely safe. We're hardly safe now. We'll have to leave by daybreak to avoid a toxic level of exposure."

"You asked if it hurt our eyes," I said.

"I did."

"I said it didn't. Did it hurt your eyes?" I asked my colleague. He nodded.

"Yeah, yeah it kinda did."

"Yeah, it kinda does. It's one of the symptoms of exposure to mortasheen."

"Except I suppose it wouldn't hurt their eyes."

"No, I imagine it wouldn't."

"And they could walk around in it without getting hurt."

"Yeah, I imagine so."

And I thought about my grandfather then and he mentioned once the town he had grown up in. That was before they changed the name to Omrurion.

"So," I said, licking my lips just once, "I suppose it's just lucky I happened to be immune. After all, Mopundra said he was immune too."

"For a while. Any person could potentially be immune to mortasheen for a while. I imagine only the occupants of this town are safe from the thing forever."

"Well let's leave tomorrow then," I said, and rose. "I don't

want to tempt fate and be stuck here forever.”

“No, I agree fully,” B said.

“What will happen to the town?” D asked as we all turned up the steps to our rooms.

“Nothing,” B said. “Maybe a hundred years ago some fool would have tried to destroy the town and the creatures living in it. But all that would do is spread the disease around. No, we’ll do nothing to it,” B said, as he turned his eyes to look at me directly, “and we’ll do nothing to anyone who ever came from here. The war ended a long time ago. We need every person we can get to get things back in shape.”

Then he turned to his room and closed the door.

My colleague and I went to our rooms and closed the door as well.

For a moment I had the mad idea to put the detective book away and start in earnest to read those enigmas of my colleagues like a good citizen.

But my grandfather’s book was in my suitcase and I drew it out and started reading it.

“Long day,” my colleague said.

“Long day,” I repeated

And we drifted off to sleep, and the morning after left.

THE RATS

The complex stank of them, and with it the sensation of being in enemy territory. Dr. Wexen had encountered rats before. It was his specialty. But this? This was something new.

He looked up at the apartment building now occupied by things that were not human. Dr. Olira Narmir walked over to him.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Her nodded. Allyn Wexen had devoted twenty years to the study of rats and though Narmir was younger, barely in her late twenties, he knew she had a similar skill. She was not asking for confirmation but fear of the known.

They put on their protective plastic suits specially toughened to be resistant to rat teeth and entered past the doors of the building. They knew, but they had to be sure. If only to prove to the local government.

Or else the pandemic they imagined would spread.

The problem had first been documented twelve months ago. The apartment complex seemed to have a simple infestation of rats. The residents noticed small bodies scampering in the halls and the exterminators had been called in and the infestation supposedly dealt with.

But the poison, the traps, and even the use of cats and specially trained dogs seemed to only make the problem worse. More rats arrived with their sharp teeth, their black eyes, and their first move after the poisons and the dogs and the cats was to seek out the exterminators.

Literally seek them out.

The exterminators were found dead in their homes. Electrical problems. Infections. Each of the exterminators who had been hired died. And that was not all.

The dogs, small rat terriers used especially for this were found dead in their kennels. Mauled to death. The teeth marks

were from rats, but the size was wrong. They were like the teeth of large dogs.

Then the lights went out in the building and wouldn't come on again. Neither would water nor heat. Any electrician who made repairs didn't survive. Accidents. Any attempt by an occupant of the building to either restore the power or kill one of the rats died. Accidents. So, after just two months the building was condemned. And yet no means could be found to destroy it.

Any attempt by anyone to harm the building was met with brutal efficiency. Any bill, any legislative move and the offending party died.

After a lowly bureaucrat had his throat slashed for proposing, (mind you, proposing, not putting anything into law,) the means to destroy the building the authorities decided it was time to summon the experts. And they came.

Outside the rest of the team was assembled. Dr. Tald was monitoring the electronic relay they had, a tracking device to indicate their position. Drs. Cynhan and Oka were going over the data provided by the invaders, everything from environmental factors to ambient heat. Cynhan and Oka would be able to tell if anything toxic was present, or, based on heat signatures, where the creatures were. That was the hope.

Dr. Wexen and Narmir entered the foyer and turned on the flashlights located on their shoulders then made sure their air supply was full and secure. There was no telling how many vermin occupied the building after being abandoned for ten months but they were taking no chances.

Their suits glistened in the shadows. This was not a mere trick of the light. Dr. Narmir had constructed a defence against them, an electric field tied directly into their suits. If any rats touched them, they wouldn't survive. Provided they were still normal rats. That was the fear.

"Okay. Cameras are up and running. Dr. Cynhan?"

Dr. Cynhan looked up from his scans.

"Yeah, Allyn?"

"How's the environment look to you?"

"Good." Dr. Cynhan scanned the video, looking for anything dangerous. Then something caught his eye.

"Allyn?"

"Yeah?"

"There's a hot spot in the wall ahead of you. A big one."

The heat signature seemed like a massive ball of movement. Dr. Wexen moved toward it.

"Here?" He indicated with his hand.

"Yeah."

He drew out a small sharp pickaxe and drove it directly into the wall. After ten months of activity, it collapsed, and out poured dozens of rats. They swarmed aggressively to Dr. Wexen but when the first one struck his suit it exploded backward, dead.

This was the moment. The other beasts looked at him and he could almost see hate in their eyes as they scampered back through the hole. One in particular looked back to him from the hole's edge, eyed him then turned its attention to Dr. Narmir and slid into the darkness.

Dr. Wexen shuddered. It had paused to look at their faces, studying them. It knew what they looked like. It could recognize them.

"Let's go upstairs," he said.

They climbed the stairs. Going down to a basement or some other darker place might have made more sense but the rats occupied the high ground. The building had twelve floors and from the reports they had systemically climbed upward, building their nests in the upper places.

However, and this was what intrigued him, they had also changed a fundamental aspect of their character in the climb. Rats

almost always clung near walls. Their eyesight was poor and they used the walls as guides. Only a sick rat infected by a plague would willingly avoid touching the walls. But the urine trails showed something else. The rats moved in the middle of the hallways. They avoided the walls unless they wanted to tunnel into them.

One or two sick rats were possible, but all of them? The entire colony acted the same way and as Dr. Wexen realized it *was* a colony. This was no mere swarm for the rats who used the hallways must have possessed an advantage never before seen. Pinpoint visual acuity.

They climbed, noticing more and more urine trails which glowed under ultraviolet filters. The trails told the story. The smallest rats were scouts. They clung to the middle to get as much visual information as possible. They could see, possibly better than he could. Yes, these were scouts and that left several bitter questions lingering inside him as he walked.

Like what kind of rats had killed the dogs?

Dr. Narmir spoke.

"I'm getting sound coming from that doorway ahead of us."

There was a rustling sound like a cloth draped back and forth over a carpet. Dr. Wexen opened the door; it sizzled slightly from his touch. The grey door gave way and they shone their lights in.

Two massive black eyes reflected the light perfectly. The rat was walking back and forth, its tail dragging behind it, making the sound. Its fur was brown, its teeth glinting yellow, its head tapering forward, staring at them. For the merest moment, Allyn had the deepening terror that it had paced back and forth specifically to draw them here, to use the sound to bring them to this point. And the sound was joined.

Three other rats had crept about behind them in a perfect

military formation, shoulder to shoulder, blocking their route. For these rats were no mere scouts. They were soldiers. And each one of them was the size of a pit bull.

“Olira,” Wexen whispered.

“Yeah, Allyn,” she replied.

“Bring the fucking pain,” he said and closed his eyes.

The rats leaped and as they did so Dr. Narmir activated the device. For one split second one of the rats was on top of him, its fur sizzling but still trying to rip him apart, then a sound, a whining buzzing screech half as loud as a jet taking off.

The creatures screamed and fled. The sound stopped and Allyn staggered to his feet.

“Is your suit cut?” Dr. Narmir asked. The rats had gone directly for him; they had perceived him as the larger threat. He checked his suit. There were some claw marks but the suit remained whole.

“What the fuck was that?” Dr. Oka asked.

“I don’t know but I seriously hope that’s as large as they get. Dr. Cynhan?”

“Yeah, Allyn?”

“Scan the area, see if there’s anymore of them.”

A few seconds later and then, “No. No, you’re clear.”

“Okay. Dr. Oka?”

“What?” he asked bluntly. The man wasn’t known for his tact.

“I need you to find out if this is the only place they’ve created their nest.”

“Think they’re expanding?”

“You saw how big they were. I can’t imagine this place giving them enough food and with no water . . .” He shuddered then.

“Allyn, what is it?” Olira asked.

“They cut the water. Why would they do that, unless . . .”

He went into the apartment and she followed. He went to the kitchen sink and turned on the taps. And cool water flowed.

"I don't get it," Dr. Narmir said. "We were told the water was cut off."

"It *was*," Dr. Wexen replied. "And when everyone left, they turned the water back on." He went deeper into the apartment and found the other clue he had only now expected. Food. Canned food. Bread, fresh fruit, even eggs. It had been piled carefully together and what was more frightening it was in a refrigerator. A working refrigerator.

"They turned the power back on," he said.

"Then we're right," she replied.

"Yeah. We need to reach the top floor. We need proof of what we've discovered."

"Hey, Doc." It was Dr. Oka.

"You couldn't have got the information that quickly."

"Nope. Don't care about that though."

"Hmm?"

"Did you one better. Scanned the sewers under this place."

Dr. Oka would have just used the technology to read the heat signatures underground.

"And?"

"And nothing. They aren't using the sewers to move. Maybe one or two, but not all of them, and if those rats are that big it isn't difficult to see why."

"Bottleneck," Dr. Wexen said.

"They're stuck in the building," Dr. Oka replied.

"Not completely stuck. They're smart enough to steal food. Or rather the smallest ones can steal food." He paced the floor just as the rat had done while Dr. Narmir stood watch outside. Yes, there was only one solution. Go up, see what was on the twelfth floor and leave as quickly as possible without dying.

"Alright. Check anyway. That's an order."

"Got it." He didn't bother saying goodbye.

"Dr. Tald?"

"Yes, Allyn?" He had never stood on ceremony.

"You have our position?"

"Yeah."

"We're heading up but first I need to do something. And I need your help."

"Name it."

"I need you to track a rat for me. Then we go up."

Catching the scout had been easy. Dr. Narmir had opened the refrigerator while Dr. Wexen threw out some of the perishable goods, scattering them in the hallway. Perhaps it would draw some of the soldiers, but he assumed, (correctly,) they'd send a scout first. Which they did. Or rather twenty of them.

They swarmed at him to investigate and he fired at them, tranquilizing four of them. As a precaution, they had multiple tracking relays and he used two of them, attaching the tiny devices to the rats. It was a calculated risk. If they were as smart as he imagined they'd never allow him access to anything important. They'd either kill their comrades or remove the devices as soon as possible.

But he suspected they wouldn't be this smart, not this time. In the insect world scouts were disposable. Many species of insects sacrificed themselves, but moreover, few species of insects paid attention to scouts or workers. It was entirely possible they'd ignore the intrusion as being low priority and he'd have access to what he needed most.

Before they awoke Dr. Narmir indicated the sounds of rustling. The soldiers were coming. They had to move now.

The climb was strangely uneventful. They were not stopped and the soldiers never ventured too close. Dr. Wexen

realized why. The scouts numbered in the hundreds, possibly thousands. But the soldiers? He suspected there were less than twenty of them in the entire building. If four of them had been almost killed then a frontal assault would be equally suicidal for the rats as it would be for them.

A nagging fear gripped him. He watched Dr. Narmir climb ahead and a vague terror grew. Social insects acted like this. Social insects had castes, had methodologies like this, but social insects had more than two castes.

When he worked on the scouts he noticed their gender. They were all female. He wasn't sure but he suspected the soldiers, if they were following social insect structures were also female.

In the insect world males occupied a small niche, useful only for reproduction and little else. But these were not insects but mammals. He shuddered at the implications as they climbed into the onrushing darkness of the nest above.

"Dr. Cynhan?" he called out.

"Yes?"

"What do your instruments show?"

As he spoke Dr. Narmir stopped at the foot of the stairs.

"Lots of heat signatures."

"Dr. Tald?"

"What is it, Doc?"

"The other relays, where are they right now?"

"One went straight down into the sewers. The other is in the apartment directly ahead."

They had divided up, one going to scout below, one above. Perhaps to inform of their presence, but, inform who?

"Allyn." Dr. Narmir motioned ahead. And then he saw them. At first, he mistook them for people. They were standing upright, their arms hanging at their sides almost uselessly. Somehow, he was reminded of useless bayonets left hanging inches from the mud, dulled and rusted but no less lethal for all

that.

They were not moving. He looked down to their feet and the tail was wrapped about an ankle but below the ankle was not feet but paws. And the most terrifying realization was when he shone the light directly at their eyes. They were not black, not like the soldiers; they were blue or brown or one was even green. And the eyes were completely human.

Males he realized. They numbered perhaps six or eight and though he could detect their true features thanks to their heat signatures in the dark it was easy to mistake them for people.

This was why they were holding the apartment so closely, waiting for the males to be ready, each one meant to slither out and escape to find others, and if they were insectlike to die, but if truly mammalian each one would then move on, impregnating others, creating new colonies . . . but what others? What existed at the centre of the colony?

“Should I use . . .?” Dr. Narmir asked.

“No. No, they won’t attack. They won’t risk injuring themselves. They’re a finite resource and she knows it.”

“She?”

Dr. Wexen stepped forward. One of the males, the one with green eyes stepped forward but Wexen slid a finger along his chest. Sparks flew and the male stepped back. He indicated the door, a human gesture, but also raised his hands, indicating he meant no harm.

The green-eyed male turned to the others and several soldiers slid from the shadows. He counted five. Altogether even with the weapons on hand, he wouldn’t survive. But if even four of the males died, if all the soldiers died in the attempt the damage to the colony would be absolute. And she knew it.

“Dr. Narmir?” he whispered to her.

“Yes?”

“Whatever happens make sure you don’t get your suit

cut.”

“Allyn?”

“We’re in a nest and the only protection we have are these suits. If I’m right they won’t attack, not if I do everything right. If I’m wrong, I’ll be dead in three minutes. There’s a reason I picked you, a reason I wanted you with me. If we don’t make it out slaughter every soldier and every male you can. I *know* you Olira. You’ll make me proud if this fails. We can’t let them spread, not without establishing things first.”

And then he went past them, Dr. Cynhan monitoring there ahead of Allyn a massive blob of heat, just beyond the door as Dr. Wexen stepped inside.

She was massive, an immobile pile of fur and flesh. She dwarfed him. The apartment had been adapted for her needs. Dozens of scouts existed, each one moving in a line passing food directly to her bloated mouth. Her eyes seemed glazed but he knew she was more than simply the centre of the colony.

She was its mind.

She turned in the blackness, her eyes regarding him with a cool detachment. She rose on legs thickened like tree trunks and strode toward him. She seemed so cumbersome upon the ground and yet she walked to him, each stride purposeful. She was aware of him and was making sure he was aware of her.

The scouts clustered about her feet, a few being casually crushed. He noticed one of the scouts with the device he had attached; she glanced at the scout as if to say, “I know, what of it?” The males were behind him, not noticing him. They fixed their eyes on Dr. Narmir; the soldiers must have explained about the noise.

“Allyn, what are you doing?” Dr. Tald asked.

“We need proof of just how powerful and dangerous this threat is.”

"You have your proof. Get out."

"It's a queen," Allyn replied. "All of these are her sons and daughters. Tell me how old do you think she is?"

"That's not important." The queen was closer to him now.

"Yes, it is. They took this building to build their nest and they've had roughly a year to do it. This kind of growth, this rapidity . . ."

"Time to leave." This was Dr. Narmir speaking. "Or I bring them pain and if I have to, I'll drag you out."

"One thing first."

He bent down. He kneeled before the queen and she eyed him idly with a vague uncertain curiosity. He then turned off the suit's defences. She bent down and sniffed him. A scout came forward ready to bite but the queen drew back a massive front paw, barring the scout.

"Allyn, what are you doing?"

"We're leaving," he said simply and crawled backward out of the room. He kept his eyes low, not staring at the queen or the males. One of the males, a blue-eyed one raised a paw to strike at him but the queen hissed, a terribly reptilian sound, and the male slunk back.

When he reached Dr. Narmir he spoke directly.

"Is your suit cut? Did they try to get in?"

"No."

He looked up and saw Dr. Narmir's face then had her turn around. He patted her body over, letting a few sparks arch in the air then had her pat his body over and finally turned the suit's defences back on. It was unlikely the queen would send a spy but he had to be sure. She was as smart as he was. Possibly smarter.

They left.

Outside he shook a moment and collapsed to a nearby wall. Dr. Narmir did likewise.

The others came to them.

"You still have a relay on the other one?" Dr. Wexen asked, looking upward to Dr. Tald.

"Yes, of course."

"Track it, see where it goes. What did you learn Dr. Oka?"

"It's a bottleneck, like I said, they can't get out, nowhere else to go."

"Okay, okay," he sputtered a moment, his legs shaking. Nowhere else to go, or at least none of the larger ones have anywhere else to go. Unless . . .

"We need to track them," he said.

"Them?" Dr. Narmir asked, looking at him.

"The males. Can we do that?"

"Of course," Dr. Cynhan replied.

"Good."

At night they left, scattering to different streets. In the darkness they seemed almost human, walking on two legs, letting their arms swing at their sides. Like bayonets left rusted too long in the sun. They scoured the city, occasionally breaking in, and stealing.

So, the scouts hadn't brought in the food. Dr. Wexen wondered if this was the males' purpose beyond reproduction. Perhaps a new evolutionary force or adaptation.

They watched from a distance.

It would have been easy to kill them but Allyn had to be sure of where they were going, sure if they were the first or merely part of an existing species.

In the dark he remembered the creaking sound of the queen walking toward him, breaking a few of her own children in the movement. For a moment he had the realization of smaller sounds, whimpering. If the queen was the first she might have given birth to the next generation of royalty. Of things like her.

The males roamed, collected and returned. They slid among the shadows without difficulty. They were observed from rooftops and hidden places. Dr. Wexen was satisfied at the end, his terror satisfied his mind about what was to happen next.

They sealed the complex and systematically cut all ties between the building and the outside, but, and this was crucial, they made sure a steady supply of food existed. They constructed an airlock of sorts and orders were made to place food there, enough to satisfy the colony. It was to be provided every night at the exact time the males left. No deviations.

The building was sealed in the daytime. Sewers were cut and the paths used by the scout allowed a clear path on what to seal and how. They could have killed the colony or tried to. But Wexen knew how that would turn out.

No. He had made the first overture. No violence, no brutality. They had defended themselves and the queen knew in a fight they were formidable. They had chosen not to fight. He hoped they were the only members of their species. The males had acquired food but nothing else. Perhaps there were other queens out there and if there were this might curtail them further. If not . . .

The orders were meant to be carried out as long as necessary. They were to be given food and more importantly communication. The soldiers assigned were under orders without question to speak while working, to talk about any subject and to hope they would be heard.

The rats had not attacked while the building was sealed. They had seemed wary, and cautious, but they hadn't attacked. This was a good sign. A good first sign. Dr. Wexen had the vaguest notion there in the apartment as the queen loomed over him of a rat being kicked to the side and the perspective of who was who flipped back and forth in his mind.

But perhaps in a hundred generations of their time, they might make the response he expected.

They might communicate back.

The mayor was not happy about all this. He wanted them exterminated but the team correctly pointed out any one fertile rat, any one potential queen could start this all over again and they could learn and what would they learn if their brethren were destroyed? What vengeance could they reap? In the end, the mayor knew that they were right.

But he did ask a final question before they left.

“What happens if they aren’t friendly?”

“What happens if we aren’t?” Allyn replied.

TARDIGRADES

Sitting on her desk was a small object. It was grey and the soft whirring of gears were heard, or what one might assume to be gears. In truth, the device ran on soft pivots and joints like those sockets of a skeleton which was an apt analogy since to all intents and purposes the object seemed alive.

The table was composed of glass, smoothed and rounded and sat in a dome-shaped room, walls a subtle shade of white.

The floor was red-orange and one sliver of the room was devoted to what would be considered a window, revealing a scarlet desert outside.

The door on the far end peeled open and revealed Uluulume and Uthrullu as they strode inside on legs as grey as the thing sliding across the table, whirring much as the clockwork creature did.

"Is all in readiness?" Uluulume asked idly, then went to pick up the creature half-carelessly as if nothing mattered now.

"All is, yes," Uthrullu replied and just as carelessly, or so it seemed, went to the window then.

"How long?"

"Our fleet will depart within an arosen."

"How many?"

"What you really want to know is will Gyaljaira be among them?"

At her daughter's name, she stiffened audibly and all the careless grace bled out of her body as if it pooled upon the floor. Without turning she said, "yes."

"Gyaljaira will lead the assault. You knew this."

"I tried to stop it," Uluulume said. "I had hoped perhaps some accident would keep her out of this."

"She is one of the finest soldiers we have."

"Don't you think I know that," at this, the mother turned,

“but it doesn’t change the fact that she could be going to her death.”

Uthrullu went over to stare at the thing in Uluulume’s grasp. It was a small grey object composed of eight limbs and a subtly blocklike body. Eyeless and rounded it seemed somehow incomplete.

After being placed back upon the table it quietly went about, reaching one edge and then another, slower all the time until finally it stopped.

Uthrullu looked up into Uluulume’s eyes to see her crying tearlessly.

“It will be alright,” she told her then, “your daughter will come home again.”

A sandstorm began from the east, an east wind moving slow and soft and mild, rising into the fury of a hurricane . . .

Year 21,756 CC. (Common Calendar.)

Day 45th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

Today is the first day of our journey to make war. We have studied the enemy closely, making note of their weapons and sophistication. We have also made note of other organisms, some far smaller than anything previously known.

One, in particular, appears similar to an aigreath back home, save the ones in the enemy’s country are much smaller. My mother used to own such things before they became extinct.

Perhaps I can bring some back as trophies.

One can only hope.

The fleet complement is prepared. We are in proper formation and need only hit our targets to begin the assault.

The quiet is deafening.

At such times I try to remember my mother singing when I was a child.

If our work is successful, perhaps I will have daughters of my

*own. If not, our kind may follow so many others into extinction.
We must not fail them . . .*

Ogilvy the astronomer sat looking at the stars one night when he noticed several unusual specks moving in the dark. They seemed at first like comets but their trajectory was wrong. He counted over fifty of them, moving in regular formation.

He left the observatory and by a nearby hill sat and watched. He could have used the telescope but there wasn't any need. The objects were visible to the naked eye.

And each of them was coming toward the Earth . . .

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 46th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

We have arrived.

I felt the deafening thud like a heartbeat for the first time.

Outside the searing heat was intense but even still I could hear the machines working, putting ourselves together. I know the others are alright. They have all reported in.

*Mother, if you are hearing this it means we're going to be okay.
The invasion has begun.*

They arrived in small fields and out-of-the-way towns, blistering the ground. Crowds gathered at the spectacle save one who once looked and then madly, wisely ran away. Some noticed him as he passed, but not many.

Great cylinders of tarnished metal they seemed.

Guardsmen were called, then the army and their horses, all scarlet in their uniforms.

The cylinders seemed to be moving in the dirt as arms extended from them, gradually connecting a latticework of something.

Legs one of the people realized. The cylinder was building

its own legs.

Cannons were brought forth to fire upon the things. But they had already survived the depth of space. They had survived solar radiation, airless vacuum and being bombarded by countless smaller objects, each moving faster than a cannonball.

The weapons were useless as a blade of grass against a tank.

When the first cylinder rose on its three legs some of the people marvelled and then were turned to ash.

Without sight or sound the invisible fire swept them all away . . .

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 48th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

My orders were not obeyed.

I gave strict orders to my second, to Queqiao that the enemy was not to be touched. Instead, what did I find on the previous day?

I found a litany of ashes.

I told her this was not our purpose in being here but she protested that the enemy was about to attack her and she acted in self-defence.

I noticed the weapons the enemy had. Primitive. I should have executed her for incompetence but every soldier will be needed in the campaign ahead.

Still.

I told Xiaelusua to keep an eye on her.

That one is dangerous. She could jeopardize our world . . .

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 52th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

Today we encountered something remarkable.

The ocean.

We had never encountered the ocean before. Our machines

plunged into the waters easily but the sight of it was unimaginable Mother. Shimmering patterns of light shifted into blue the further into the distance one looked.

There were ships upon it, fleeing away.

Gyaldana noticed one of them, this iron-clad thing. She was young, perhaps too young and didn't understand that only the enemy could create such a thing. She went closer to examine it. And it struck her, breaking two of her legs. As the other ships escaped, we had to go to save her but it was too late.

We turned the attacker to slag, then brought her up onto the surf. Her legs had been broken and she had fallen into the water. Mother, she drowned. No one had ever drowned on Hraisph in a million years. To see it, to know it . . .

The ocean loomed beyond us, the ships sailing safely away and we didn't follow them.

We dared not.

We just let them pass and returned the way we came.

The creatures, (there was no other word to describe them,) stumbled from fields and hills and in their wake released the red weeds. The scarlet plants slowly began to choke the life out of native species, turning the green grass black with decay.

Ogilvy had fled, taking passage across the waters but his friend had remained. After seeing the things falling, he turned and ran away. Now he was in hiding in the ruins of an old abandoned church.

The red weeds followed him, and in their wake came the fighting machines.

On three legs they strode across the country occasionally stalking a man or woman but otherwise, they seemed to have no rhyme or reason to their actions.

If there was method behind them the man could not say.

He watched as one of the fighting machines began to sway,

noticing the legs stumbling a bit as if intoxicated.

He wondered what was going on in the invaders' minds . . .

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 67th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

Queqiao violated my orders for the second time.

We were upon the fields when she went to one of the enemy and plucked it from the ground. And then the thin proboscis of the machine shot out and impaled the flesh.

"What are you doing?" I asked her and she explained she intended to feed upon the body which seemed so like the bodies of creatures from ancient times.

Before I could stop her, the alien blood went coursing through her veins.

The enemy saw this and began to panic.

Queqiao turned toward the others, toward our enemy and I pulled her back. The invasion was not going to plan.

This was not the way things were meant to be . . .

Uluulume walked by the dry-dust shores of where a river had once been a billion years before. All thoughts turned to her daughter then. If all was going according to plan the fleet would have come together by now and began to harvest the enemy, or pieces of them, clearing the way for the rest to follow.

To evacuate all Hraisph.

Uthrullu came running after her and the mistress of the great house turned.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

And Uthrullu explained.

There was something wrong with one of the soldiers. Something physically amiss.

They hadn't noticed before because it was such a rarity, a

disease, one obliterated from each corner of all Hraisph. But the lingering remnant was left in one of the soldiers now stationed on the Earth.

And this disease would only get worse.

And it could infect the others . . .

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 78th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

The invasion goes poorly Mother. All my strategies have failed. Our goal was such a simple thing, to contain the enemy and clear the land of them, to bring forth the things of our home and set them here. And when ready take the flesh of them to grant us immunity to the diseases of this new dominion.

Instead, Queqiao fed upon their bodies and others followed after her. They know the dangers in this and yet all my words have fallen deaf upon them.

Only Zephirota is left loyal to our original cause, and Basciel.

So, I have had no choice but to take my leave of them, with my two loyal soldiers following . . .

The man, after subduing a minister who had rambled about devils, left the ruined church and went about the further ruins. Eventually, he found a man digging the ground who went on at great length about building a paradise underground.

The man left the fool to his folly and went on.

The fighting machines were stumbling now. He crossed the ruined corpse of one and noticed the broken body which was inside.

It was like a head with tendrils underneath it, a hooklike mouth and two small piercing eyes. Out of its lipless mouth foam was pooling to the ground below. He left it to its decay and went on his way.

Year 21,756 CC.

Day 79th of the cycle of Irae Trealme.

We stopped by the shore a time. I signaled for the others but by now the others have either gone or gone mad.

The organized clearing of the new settlement has decayed into chaos. There was nothing I could do. Mother, I am sorry.

But something fortunate remains.

For Basciel has made a discovery.

Embedded in the soil are indeed the small creatures we noticed before, one in particular. It does indeed look exactly like an aigreath and yet it is so much more. It is a survivor. She has analyzed it, discovering it is capable of near-infinite survival. Neither heat nor cold nor a lack of water will kill it, Mother. Even the depth of space will not end the thing.

We have even tried to communicate with it, using the chemical languages we've learned.

It is sentient, Mother. It thinks.

It is the true ruler of the Earth.

We imagined the creatures with their roads and cities ruled but we were wrong. It's them, imprisoned upon every continent, imprisoned in every pond of water. With our mission ruined, I have opened negotiations.

We have nothing left to lose.

Zephirota believes we are both quite mad. She cannot hear the creatures singing and so has resolved to go into the ocean and pierce her armour's skin.

Perhaps she is right.

But this is all that we have left Mother.

This gift of an alien mind willing to side with us.

As for the enemy . . . considering what we have seen the enemy do to their own kind any communication would have been impossible. Even in the wars of our history never did we achieve such destruction as they have.

The other machines cannot return but we know the rendezvous

point. Basciel and I are prepared to leave. I hope someone is there to come for us when we arrive . . .

The man returned to London to see the city half-ruined, the red weeds now withering to shards of crimson glass. He came toward the streets he knew and by the train station, he saw her waiting for the last trains to leave.

But the trains left hours ago and only her hope was keeping her here.

When he came.

And they embraced as if all the death had not come, as if the Earth had not ended. And they returned the way they came to the homes of his people.

And they sat and ate in silence together . . .

The ruined body of a fighting machine was found in the surf seemingly rusted but it was not rust they realized as the sailors dragged it from the sea. It was just the pilot who had let itself be carried and smashed against the metallic body, melting and dissolving like a slug in a sea of salt.

The other fighting machines had all died, killed by some pestilence.

And when all were counted 48 were found.

On the final night before the tally, there had been a single flash of light in a field far to the north near the borderlands. A few witnesses reported seeing two fighting machines that way but since no machines were found the witnesses were dismissed out of hand.

And later Ogilvy the astronomer noted that more of the ships were flittering through space but they were no longer on their way to Earth.

They were going to Venus . . .

The room remained the same. The small clockwork creature was still there walking along what seemed an infinite sea of glass. Uluulume paced the room slowly as the door peeled back and Gyaljaira appeared behind Uthrullu.

She made her report. The invasion had failed utterly, brought down by an infection which began with one of her own.

But though the invasion had failed a new opportunity presented itself.

Embedded in her body the small creatures were.

They had been able to acquire a few, these first emissaries of all who would follow. She had even begun to mention the opportunity to begin modification of them, something which they acquiesced to.

And they were hardly alone.

Embedded in the soil, encased in the water were untold species seemingly imprisoned by their size. The creatures mentioned how easily they could spread, how easily with but a few thousand years they could make the deserts green again.

With proper modifications and enough numbers of course.

New ships were already being prepared but not like before. No war machines were needed. Instead, they would seem almost invisible, netting small colonies upward to be taken here and changed and released into the once living soil of the once living ground, given free rein to begin their work.

The humans had names for these various kinds of creatures. But such names neither the peoples of Hraisph or the creatures themselves knew.

One of them crawled along Gyaljaira's limb and noticed without eyes the clockwork thing on the table.

In time it would become that large or larger. Larger surely, if given enough time.

"And what of the Earth you've left behind?" Uluulume asked the emissaries.

It hardly mattered, they replied. The invisible lords of all land and sea stared at the clockwork thing on the table and mentioned how they would seem the same but different in time.

And those that did not change could always remain in the bodies of their liberators. Her daughter looked stronger Uluulume noticed. Perhaps eventually she would be strong enough to stand.

Mother and daughter stared out the window as a hurricane cooled away to a soft, smooth south wind and watched as more ships left, some carrying soldiers.

Some carrying their new allies with them . . .

In time the exodus might even be complete, leaving all of the Earth empty of the unseen. Perhaps humanity might not even know why the Earth seemed dying . . .

BONE HOUSE WASP

I. His name is John and on his thirtieth birthday a wasp began to talk to him. He met it in a flowerbed on some summer day. He spoke to him and whispered to him and he began to pray. He listened to it, prayed to it, and heard what it had to say.

It spoke of places underground and spoke of chambers none knew of. It whispered of creatures embedded in the walls. It sang of bone house wasps.

He listened to it and turned his eyes to where his family lay in their beds like chrysalises, waiting to be born.

He went into his family's rooms and later some found his wife and daughters embedded in the walls, still screaming silently, their bodies pierced with nails like stings of certain insects. Or so he thought, or so he thought, as dying he was led away.

II. His name is John. It was on his thirtieth birthday he first heard the voice. In the morning the family got together, cousins and uncles and aunts and his wife entertained in the garden outside Wexham Priory.

They entertained in the summer sun upon the grass before an audience of uncles and aunts and cousins and nephews and nieces, and his daughters ran with them in their white summer dresses, and Martha his wife entertained in the shade of an elm, discussing how John seemed so peculiar lately.

And all the elder eyes of aunts nodded in agreement, watching him play, pretending he was not a man but simply the slip of a boy.

Later after all had been tended to in the heat of an afternoon after his wife and daughters had retired to bed, he went out into the gardens, to tend the roses he said.

But they didn't have roses in the garden anymore.

That was when he heard the voice.

It stole quietly from the green shimmering heat of the grass and he cocked his ear, listening for it. It then stole silently into his mind. It spoke of cool summer cities on the world's under-hidden side and he stopped still as stone and listened.

Where came the voice?

It seemed to be from the green shimmer of the heat-bled grass but the more he heard the closer it crept until he was aware it came from inside his own skull.

He turned toward the white ice-cool shadow of his home and regarded the white milk-smooth shirt he wore as if he were not himself but a portion of the home he knew.

And suddenly he imagined his house too spoke to him a language of bones and the insect in his head began to make him imagine he could fly, his skin hard as diamond, his eyes sparkling like jewels in the sun.

And he went inside, passed the foyer, climbed the curling ammonite coil of the stairs and entered the white bone room of his wife as she stirred and asked him how he was. And he smiled.

There was a hammer in one hand.

Nails in the other . . .

III. His name is John. Wait, that was said before. He was celebrating his thirtieth birthday when he heard the wasp singing.

He lived in Wexham Priory in the summertime. And his uncles, aunts, cousins and all others had come to celebrate.

I can see them now. He had three uncles, all bald-headed and withered like tattered bones and his aunts plump and billowing out like sails rupturing upon the shore. And children running, their dress clothes torn on rusty nails and the cries of wasps and wasp stings burning the air.

And he is sitting there in the shade of the elm a time by the edge of the trees, green sea brushing against the green shoreline of the grass.

I can almost hear him speaking to his uncle Dorn about strange dreams he's been having and of a land of somewhere else.

A land of somewhere else? his uncle asks.

Yes. I've been having strange dreams about the Sunflower Empire.

I've never heard of that, his uncle says.

I've seen a frozen country where the sun never sets and the people in their final days become chrysalises then emerge outward into other shapes.

What other shapes?

At this point, Dorn's wife comes and he is led away and John is sitting staring into the green shore of the grass, his finger tapping at the glass table like a fly brushing against a windowpane.

All this I see but I've seen all this before.

No, I haven't. Hours are speeding by now, children racing and older people talking and John singing but the songs are from places he doesn't know of and his daughter Margaret calls him silly for singing such silly little things, about insects as large as men duelling on the grass.

And of the places he doesn't know still is he singing, even as he ascends the stairs, following where they have gone to bed.

A hammer and nails in hand . . .

IV. His name is John.

No. No, I've said this already, it's done. It's over. He kills them or tries to and it's over. But I return to Wexham Priory and the celebration of his thirtieth birthday.

No.

No, it's hours earlier before the celebration of his birth.

I can walk through his home. I can enter the front doors and pick up the invitations on that small oval table there, resting on what seems almost like spider legs. I can walk up the curling

ammonite coil of the ivory stairs. I can peer into each bedroom.

I can watch Margaret and Gabrielle as they sleep, hear each stroke of their breathing and pass ghostlike through walls to arrive at his resting place. His bedroom is large. There's a mirror by the door and their bed is massive and always white like everything here except the furniture and their eyes.

I hadn't noticed before but as he stumbles in his sleep I half-imagine that all their eyes are black. Black-within-black eyes flicker open and suddenly I am carried in the wake of his sleep and the wake of his dreams.

In dreams, he is standing upon a tower of ivory striding beside an ocean of salt. And the people there he sees they come to him, their hair scarlet as the rain, each drop like a seed of blood.

He imagines himself upon the northern edge of the world there in the Sunflower Empire.

I never learn why.

Then I saw in the dream a great eye swimming the sky, larger than the moon and twice as wide gazing down upon him like an accusing god.

All this I saw and I know no reason why.

Then the peoples of the Sunflower Empire become like metallic wasps or nails, blood their commerce and their currency, and each is killed when the change concludes lest one of them emerge to devour all the world.

All this I've seen in dreams.

Suddenly I am thrown from his vision and invisibly collapse against the far wall, nestled beside the door as he rises and she rises and they prepare for his thirtieth birthday . . .

V. His name is.

I've heard his name again but I'm trying not to say it now. His name is. No. No, I've said it before.

His name.

No.

His.

Stop.

His name is John.

Son of a bitch.

And he is celebrating his thirtieth birthday.

I've already said all that.

An insect began to talk to him. He met it in a flowerbed on some summer day. It spoke to him and whispered to him and he began to pray.

What did he pray?

Wait. I can see him now standing upon the green shoreline of the grass. He is mouthing the words of a prayer but it's not to something I can understand.

I wander close.

I feel suddenly as if I've wandered throughout the world looking for something which only now, I seem to find.

He is praying to it. He is naming it.

He calls it Tsairaphon.

At the coming of its name, I am pulled forward not into his dreams but into his thoughts. I hear them whispering now, splinters of other realms piercing through his skull.

I see him before a faucet and as the water rushes down across his hands the name of Khelimer is uttered, an ocean world with her beasts that dwell beneath her skin, hungry for his flesh.

When a sparrow sings, suddenly he standing across a desert of thorns with towers in the distance and the name of Icanthralia is upon his lips and behind his eyes, a country of birds whose flesh likewise are thorns.

Cannibal planets are birthed by every step.

His life is divided between what is and what he experiences and now in the broken rasp of a wasp's song he is taken back to Tsairaphon, which is a wasp world.

He sees great paper cities rise upward born to be melted in the rain and listens to the cries of great swollen pregnant bodies of the dying given unto others as communion.

And now begins again the ascension of stairs and his wife stirring, her white raven-feathered hair curling upon her pillow and I wait in the garden and listen as the scream is heard . . .

His name is John. It was his thirtieth birthday.

VI. His name is . . .

I try to leave.

His house is massive and the trees beyond seem to go on forever. I walk away, first step from the front door. But beyond the tree line, I get engulfed in patches of shadow as if all were shadows of moth-wasp wings.

The blind road of the path is supposed to lead somewhere. His relatives came from somewhere so I need only continue my walk and I will reach beyond the edge of his name and his story and come to a land of somewhere else.

A darker shade of pale suddenly crosses the road as I realize the trees are moving, their branches slowly bending, baring my path ahead. It is as if the trees are sentinel, realizing me some cancer and so preventing my leaving, quarantining me in the domain of his prison.

Which has sadly become my prison too.

Then passing ghostlike through the branches I watch the cars arrive but when I put my hand to the branches I am pierced. The branches all become small thorns and bar my path ahead.

I could still stumble into the briar of their labyrinth but I'd be so pierced that out the other side, I'd be sans skin, sans flesh, with only blood left to stain the floor of the world.

I turn the way I came as I hear the voice begin.

His name is John. It was his thirtieth birthday . . .

VII. His name is John and it is his thirtieth birthday celebration and I am trapped behind the boundary of his name.

I cannot escape.

I cannot move beyond Wexham Priory. I cannot move beyond the sea of green. All the branches become thorns the moment my fingers brush against them.

And I have seen his story play out now . . . I have lost count.

And each time no matter the path I take, no matter the way the story twists and turns it arrives at the same conclusion, as John is taken away.

Then the story resets again.

But now something new has begun to emerge.

It was in the garden when I felt it at last, the sheer weight of an eye staring down upon me.

I glanced upward there amid the children running, amid the same singsong lunacy of his song until words had lost their meaning when I glanced up and beheld the eye.

It was the eye in his dream, the same accusing stare and it occupied the whole of the sky.

There was no sky.

Just the eye.

It was ringed and the iris was black and the white ocean of itself I could gaze into and even see myself reflected in its milk-white glances, iris but a bald black continent amidst white waters of a white sea.

Sea. Ocean.

The more the words came to me the more they poured out of me until I had a thousand words for ocean and another thousand for sea. For water. For island and surf.

And suddenly I was no longer bound by the world herself.

I had plunged across countries of water mired of small

white islands and could see great monstrous centipedes, their skins like burnished gold warring upon rocky shores, their mouths like blades and their skin like scales of armour glittering and clicking like glass as they made their wars, then made their wars again.

And in the waters were leeches with bodies almost like women dancing to the seraph rhythm of an ocean I had never before seen and would never see again.

It was Eirylm, a voice whispered in my mind.

Eirylm?

Yes. You have crossed along the skin of Eirylm.

And suddenly I was returned to the garden and celebration just as it all was ending and everyone was going away. Again.

And I glanced to the sky and the sky alone answered me by its presence.

The eye was gone.

His name was John.

It was his thirtieth birthday celebration. But the celebration was ending.

And he climbed the stairs, singing.

A hammer and nails in hand.

And in the grass, I noticed a few small centipedes crawling away.

Into darkness then.

VIII. I had splintered perhaps.

Now when I came toward the sea of green names gripped my skull, holding tightly to pieces inside my head.

Karnessos. I beheld the name and suddenly the trees dwarfed above me and the entire world was forest and loftily cast into the topmost branches I could see cities of cathedrals suspended by the thorn-touch of branches as they held fast.

And let slip.

A gust of wind became Ezaira, a world of winds and ghosts all singing, but only singing my name. I could see their pale bodies blistering in the sun and then I returned to the garden ground from which I could never leave, except in the distorted wanderings to places that never were.

I watched the children playing and suddenly Aliquilo came into view, a devouring continent which slowly consumed the house, slaughtering them all, pulling the children into its serrated jaws as suddenly a billion eyes shot forth from off the skin of the ground, watching me.

Silently screaming for me.

And I screamed too and tried to pull away but felt the tendrils wrap around my body and I was devoured and felt myself dissolve and then decay, only to be returned to when I first came, as people continued having cake, marvelling at the good weather and the good fortune of the life young John had made.

It always came back to him, and the wasp in the grass.

I tried to hold tightly to myself but each brush of air birthed a new continent beneath my eyes and there he stood all the time in all the terrors which had been, which were now, which would be again.

An ant crawled across my foot and this had been the progeny of the act.

And always he returned, climbing the stairs and at the moment of their screams all things reset and though I had limitless opportunity within my prison yet I had no escape from it.

It seemed I would be here for all eternity.

And then I heard the whispering of the grass and saw beyond and in my terror I finally understood.

I was being consumed. I was being erased.

IX. His name is John. He is having his thirtieth birthday celebration. He is surrounded by family and friends. I am there too. I am being erased.

When the story ends, I die.

I must keep the story from ending.

And yet without knowing it each time the story does end a little more is added each time.

Their screams become longer. The men arrive and remain and I remain some seconds longer, watching him as he cups his face in his hands trying desperately to explain, and each time more words are added.

A word at a time, a word added at each cycle of time.

And I can see ahead when he is taken and the car passes out of sight that is the time of my ending.

And so, quite without realizing it, I have tried to make certain the story never ends.

I can see the beast beyond the boundaries of my sight, the beast which does not exist. Is not real.

Yet I am here, writing it, reciting it, becoming it, and so *it* is here. I can see *it* and what *it* becomes.

In the dark between universes, there is the scream. It is sound rendered black, sound given shape, like fungi growing atop the dead things of a dead universe which lay between all others.

It has no form beyond the scream of itself and cannot pass the barrier unless it be willed into being, by word.

Each word is but a small portion of itself, each name but one syllable of its true name and the more the words are added sooner comes its shape and sooner comes its shape sooner I am erased.

Like a creature held by a bone house wasp.

It is plunging closer each time and the story is spread and set across all the places I have seen, form given purpose by the

language attached to it.

One does not first name a thing and then it comes to be.

One arrives at the thing first and the name follows after.

It is dragging me through pieces of itself, ocean and forest and the sighs stinging insects make in their dying, all tying back to John and his last days as a man which will mirror my last days for when I am erased and the thing takes hold, I will no longer be a man. Even by explaining it, I give it strength. By knowing it, naming it, has it begun to pierce the veil.

And the wasp in the grass is whispering.

Whispering now to me . . .

X. "I've been having strange dreams, Uncle Dorn."

"What have you been dreaming about?"

"I've been dreaming that I go wandering in a city at the upper edge of the world surrounded by creatures that look human but are instead great insects hidden behind a human skin."

"Does Martha know?"

"No."

"Why tell me?"

"I've always known you as wise, Uncle Dorn. These dreams scare me. In my dreams, I am either devoured by them or become them. I don't want to be someone else. I want to be the man I am."

"Write it down then. Write the story down. Try to understand it perhaps. Maybe that will help."

"Thank you, Uncle Dorn. I will. You know my father always said you were the smartest man he knew."

"Well, your father says a lot of different things."

XI. The wasp is whispering to me. She is saying that if I become as she is, if I see the world as she sees it, I will be free. A creature has no story in its heart, no way to tell, no way to speak.

If I become as she is, I will be free.

The hammer and nails are in my hand.

I need only go up. I need only imagine my home is a burrow, need only imagine my sleeping daughters and wife are black cold ants and need only embed them in the walls and I will be taken away and at that time I will cease to be a man and become a beast unburdened of any thought.

Incapable of speech.

And I have seen this story from the other side like some hidden observer as if the entirety of the world were shared, as if there was an invisible ecology of invisible people among us.

But the hammer and nails feel real.

I need only ascend the stairs.

I stop.

I turn back to see the wasp now given a final form. She is as large as my wife, her body glistening blackly in the sun. She has whispered to me what will happen when the story ends. My only true escape is in this moment now.

For I will be taken away and that invisible watcher will remain subsumed within the body of the scream.

But I drop the hammer then. The nails.

I drop them and sit on the grass.

The eye is there gazing down at me, the accusing god stare, and I look up at it and we both wait, but I can wait longer.

I am no longer writing the story. I am in it.

These pale hands are mine. I am the occupant of this body. And I need only wait to survive.

All this it knows and fears.

I need only do one thing and I am safe, though I will remain in this moment upon this ground with the wasp hovering nearby and the great eye gazing down. All this I may stop with a single act and save my children and my wife.

But I will never have another moment again.

Perhaps they will awaken.

Our stories have diverged by now.

Perhaps they will awaken and find me gone and wonder where I am, and my daughters will grow and my wife will age and they will mourn me. That's their story, or what I wish to tell, or what I wish they do.

If at all possible.

But my story differs from theirs.

For I need only do one thing to save myself.

I need only say my story never ends. There is no resolution, no salvation, no damnation.

I wait upon the grass forever in indecision, never reaching my resolution.

Never reaching an . . .

THE SCYTHE

The question, such as it was, of the law, was moot. It had been twisted and usurped and the whole of society attempted to stagger upward from the grim calculations, but invariably couldn't. Women and old men, children, the strong, the weak, the affable and the criminal were, or could potentially be, rounded up and summarily charged with a crime.

And the fact of their guilt or innocence never entered the equation. These questions were not even garnered pertinent to the case. Often being innocent was no defense nor was it expected to be.

One day a man would walk the streets of the city of M, have lunch, discuss the weather and the next be arrested, charged with some crime and executed. Often in less than a day. Were these actions just? No. But that was exactly the point.

The system had been designed and implemented by one of those geniuses of reformation. After the system fell his name was lost, so great a hatred lay in the knowledge of him.

But because infamy is eternal a name was given.

Called John Eschren he was utterly convinced that true justice depended upon the right number. Literally. He devised, and after the coup, implemented his plan of reforming society, and in those days after the war had torn apart so much, when the cities beyond M were ruins, (perhaps. Later it was shown that most of the world had survived and like all true tyrants he had kept the truth from his chosen ones,) the people had initially clamoured for someone to show them the truth of how to make the world better. And he had obliged them.

The great system of numbers became the standard of law. At birth, everyone was given a sequence of ten digits. Whenever a crime was committed, anything from murder to rape, assault, to even simple theft the "great machine" would select a number, the police would be summoned and the intended target selected for death. Always death.

Prison, incarceration, fines; what were these compared to the perfection of ending the criminal's life? Now it could have been pointed out that no one charged or executed was guilty, but this wasn't the point.

The point, as summed up so eloquently by Eschren in one of his bland mandatory speeches, (in which all were compelled to stand in the great centre of the city while he addressed them from some marble monstrosity he called a palace of the people though no one, save him and his chosen servants were allowed to dwell within those opaque white walls,) was that since all previous systems of justice inevitably failed due to the lack of their convictions his system *by definition* would stand forever.

For if the merest possibility that the just be punished or the unjust rewarded had allowed corruption his system guaranteed true equality among equals. No hint of corruption, no hint of the wrong person being rewarded, no hint of the immorality of the law; now everyone *knew* the law was equal and unbiased. After all, everyone had a fair chance for their number to be up.

The system as described by him lasted four years. At the end of his reign, the people in one unequalled act of fraternity stormed his palace of the people and impaled him. I was told it took three days for him to die, suspended beyond the city walls, demanding justice by having the city burnt. I think, based on the eyewitness testimony at the time he was seriously expecting a god to punish them for their cruelty. But these are eyewitness accounts and cannot with complete accuracy be verified.

No. My point is merely to show what happened in those four years, and since the lives of 250,458 people are involved rather than document each life and notarize the whole, I will instead focus on two men whose actions or inactions ultimately led, like those of uncounted others, to the end of this system of justice.

Frederick Basilisk was born one thousand and 123 years exactly after the founding of the Fermane Empire which once controlled the world.

This point should not be overlooked. Eschren was obsessed with numbers and the number 1123 was the initial part of a Fibonacci sequence, therefore Basilisk was hired, based on this fact alone.

The man was barely in his late twenties when he was given the exacting and essential job, as Eschren supposedly called it. (There is no proof of this though.)

He was one of the children of the revolution, one of its brightest stars. Under the great leader, Basilisk proved himself worthy by completely believing in his master in everything.

One must recognize that the war had done so much that people had lost faith. No, more than faith. They had lost hope.

When Eschren secured the city, all enemies were executed as they pleaded for their lives, and his loyal followers were stationed to make ready the new age of perfect enlightenment.

The people of M welcomed Eschren and his followers. The war had taken much. Though the city was intact many lives were lost and hundreds of thousands occupied a city that supported 50 million at its zenith.

Large swathes of cement and towers and roads veered into unused realms and so attached a great aura of mystery and dread to them. The city was a labyrinth of unending corridors and plazas and for every person there was enough space to create a small island, which might have been the saner alternative.

The conflict, as all conflicts, had been fought foolishly and to no one's betterment. The buildings had remained intact only because the buildings could not be damaged. Eons of technological sophistication had created cities hard as diamonds. Battles were fought solely to decimate populations, and in those same eons when the physical was rendered indestructible human life was still fragile, indistinct, and easily crushed.

People had been taken away and disposed of. His followers did this. The city had to be protected from future depredations. Again, his followers, his chosen few acted. But the law was what obsessed Eschren. He wanted to prove the superiority of himself and his new law against further attack, to

prove the rightness of his cause.

The system was built and his chosen ones, one in particular, were given the perfect job to prove the impartiality of the state.

Basilisk became prosecutor.

He would rise, descend from his lofty place in one of the barely used towers, arrive at the domed arches of the justice building, wear something suitably dark and appropriate, and begin. With his dark hair, dark eyes, and tall, thin figure, he played the role of death, without realizing it.

This is not to say he did not know what was to happen but if one could describe Basilisk or any of Eschren's allies the words to use would be naively unaware. He followed Eschren because he was there and Eschren seemed wise and knowledgeable. It seemed inconceivable their leader was wrong so therefore he could not be wrong. The state began its depredations, obliged by those who saw no hypocrisy in the act.

Trials were simple. Someone was brought in. The number proved them guilty. Some were also charged with trying to flee but since death was the sentence added crimes were unimportant.

The accused would stand to one side, Basilisk the other, the judge before them, the dark room meant to show a certain terror to the whole affair. No one else was present unless a witness had to be provided, or created. But this was rare.

Then the accused was injected with a lethal poison; the back of the wooden chair had a tiny needle in it so once the accused sat, they were already dead. They just didn't know it yet.

And if the accused was a child? No trial exactly, just a quick injection. And if the accused was an infant? The same treatment.

Some individuals rallied, roared and screamed while others were so broken as to do nothing. Basilisk's job was to prove that the system was just, though even the unaware can not ignore screams very long.

He often thought of quitting, but couldn't. He had no place

else to go.

It was after yet another trial, another death of an infant that he started to have misgivings. One could easily argue he was not a deep thinker but the fact is he was no less wise than anyone else supposedly. No one seemed to reject this system of law.

His misgivings would only grow since the city was rapidly depopulating. The definition of crime was simple enough. Murder, theft, rape, yet when the punishment was identical and the odds of a successful crime massive what reason had anyone not to commit a crime?

Often the murderer simply took out his or her vengeance, smoked afterward, waited for the police and snubbed them, pointing out correctly that their odds of being convicted were nil. Rapists often stayed with their victims as the police looked on, satisfied that the police would do nothing since someone else would be charged and out of hundreds of thousands what were the odds it would be them?

So, after yet another infant being executed for the murder of someone twenty years older than themselves, and able to walk and talk which the murderer could not, Basilisk slowly began to question the motivations of such a thing. This questioning began over a year after he started as the prosecutor. Fortunately for history, and ourselves, he is not the catalyst, merely the endnote of the piece.

The man who proved to be the catalyst was ironically enough an officer of the law. Winston Smythe was not an official part of Eschren's coterie. Being a police officer from before he remained on only because someone had to maintain law and justice in the city.

Soon, however, as the realization of what this system meant dawned on him and others, a plan was formed which would eventually prove the truth of Eschren's statement.

But that will be explained later.

As I said the city was massive so it was easy to lose people if one wished. The only reason most remained in the core was

because the outer rim of buildings lacked lighting, and food, and though it had shelter it lacked central heating.

As such the people of M were seemingly surrounded by walls within walls going on forever. This would prove illusionary though.

Winston Smythe worked in the building of justice, located on a floor below the execution room as it was called. In his cramped office, he had reels of information on killers, thieves, etc. And he was hardly alone.

Eschren's dystopic edict had created a department obsessed with solving cases. Since the law was now geared toward capturing people investigations seemed to be passe. But Smythe and his contemporaries felt otherwise.

A large, rotund man with a greying beard and thick spectacles, the balding Smythe seemed a weak and ineffectual being but nothing could be further from the truth. Armed with a camera embedded in his left eye he meticulously recorded each murderer, thief, and rapist, and had dossiers on all of them.

One must remember that human nature had not changed. The war, as all wars before, had not made life more precious, only more twisted and distorted. And the belief that the new justice system rewarded the random meant that few took law enforcement seriously.

This was a mistake.

The plan took four years. Smythe was one part of it, but hardly alone. It has been asked by historians why they didn't simply storm the palace of the people and execute Eschren outright, but one must remember the situation for what it was. Nothing was in place to replace the current system and despite the death and the misery most people believed, erroneously, that somehow the random nature of the system made them immune.

Everyone else was going to die, but they were too important. Someone else's child was executed? A shame, but their child would be spared this fate. How? They couldn't say. So, Winston and his department lacked the public support needed. But that would change, simply put, because someone turned on a

light.

One can argue this a cliché but it was the turning on of light and heat which ultimately doomed Eschren's regime. As long as people were confined to a small area, they were manageable. But when the engineers reactivated power to the rest of M suddenly the walls which kept people in became a range of unrestricted movement as people flooded out.

But there was more. Winston's job was after all to capture fugitives. This system of capture worked well and was detrimental to everyone. The police hated it but seemed impotent since failure to capture was a crime and crimes by definition meant someone's number was up. Either they captured one person or someone else would die anyway. It seemed pointlessly cruel, and was.

But when the way became clear suddenly people started to scatter. Now mass transit existed so it was not as if the people had to walk the distance but M was so massive and Eschren's grip on the people was so intrinsically tied to them being stranded together that once they began to leave his hold on them left too.

And this was when Winston Smythe's plan came together.

The technology existed to replicate the human form. Synthetic bodies were not uncommon. And since he was entrusted with finding the criminal element and since those accused could now safely scatter and be hidden Winston Smythe went to the engineers one day, whose date is lost to history, and mentioned that he would need some biometric polymers built.

The head engineer, named Jensen, readily agreed, and when it was asked years later replied with, "What could they have done? Charge me with a crime?"

So, the stage was set.

A crime was committed, the police were dispatched, while the guilty sat about laughing at the impotence of the law. Said officers would record the criminal via cameras. The number came up, and the innocent person was selected. And the police found

said person.

Then they were taken before trial, their physical attributes tallied and a copy made. All the copy had to do was sit down and pretend to die. Since the trial didn't require the accused to speak and since death was assured once they sat there was no fear of discovery.

Then the actual accused was spirited away to a different part of the city and since they were now "dead" their number was retired as well. Repeat process ad nauseam.

And for three years they did.

During this time Basilisk had become more vocal about his displeasure. His job was pointless, his morality a fraud but more than this he was hated by everyone. Those whose families of the accused knew him wanted him dead, those who were guilty of crimes considered him a fool while like others a growing terror clutched at him to realize any day his own number could come up.

Which led ironically to the end of the regime.

No one knows exactly how or when Winston installed the camera. Some say it was during a party during the last year of the regime at Basilisk's private apartments, amid various depravities.

Others claim it was during the first year of the regime.

The only thing that matters is what it captured on the appointed day.

Basilisk had gone to the palace of the people to complain. He had become more worried over his death and the thought of death pushed all other thoughts to the side. He was obsessed with his number coming up.

The audience with Eschren was simple, unpretentious, and invaluable. This is the conversation in total, or rather its highest point of interest, as transcribed.

"I had to talk about this . . ." This is Basilisk's voice.

"It can wait . . ." Here Eschren's.

"No, it can't. Look, I have to know . . . I have to know if there's some way to avoid this."

"This?" Sound of Eschren rising from his chair by his desk and approaching Basilisk.

"The numbers. I need to know my number will never come up."

"Well, of course it won't."

"No . . . what?"

"My boy, our numbers will never come up. Not yours or mine or our associates."

"Well . . . well that's good, that's, well then what are the numbers for?"

"Justice of course. Our justice."

"Right. What?"

"Sit down." Sound of chairs across the carpet, the sound of both men sitting.

"Fred, I believe in justice. I believe that with our brand of justice, we can make an orderly world, a better world. But, if I'm not here, or you, or someone else where's the justice in that?"

"But, the machine, the machine . . ."

"The machine which governs our fate is me."

The conversation went on for several hours as Eschren detailed his convictions of justice for all, except himself.

Such hypocrisy was not shocking nor surprising. But, added to the other details, added to the totality of the regime, of its abuses, and added to the rather massive number of "dead" people hidden away in the outer parts of the city Eschren's frank exposition was enough to out him, utterly.

The conversation was distributed throughout the city. Those who had "died" from the regime returned and the families of those who had imagined them dead rejoiced and then angered themselves at the nature of the system they had been prescribed.

There was a battle, though not as grand as one might expect. Basilisk surrendered without a fight as did most of the others. Eschren's fate is already known.

Thus ended another experiment of justice. Sad to say when M was linked back to the world, they discovered many other societies just as bad or worse and the certainty of stability was not soon to be coming.

Only much later was it learned Winston Smythe had done a bit more than simply record the evidence of Eschren's hypocrisy. The damning recording had been created whole cloth. The proof of Eschren's guilt had been fabricated.

Strangely enough, no one complained.

As for justice, in the intervening decades since the death of Eschren many have argued one method or another for a just society and each one has been cut down or cut apart, as if a great scythe had hobbled them.

As for those guilty of crimes, they were not forgotten. As for what happened to them, whether it be prison, execution or worse I cannot say the outcome is fair or just. But after studying all attempts at so-called fairness justice was the best they got.

A SHORT LIFE WITHOUT REGRETS

She had arrived on Haxaires having come from a small convent by the Yangtze River, having crossed the great waters of the night. Now she stood on the scarlet sands.

She had come with a legion of others there in the great hollowed world of a ship and as she alighted from the silver stairs she felt at her throat.

It was an unconscious gesture but the collar was still there. She had taken orders and done her duty, had laboured for ten years and now she was here.

She had come to Haxaires.

"Oh, hello."

Glancing from her reverie she saw the doctor standing there, his hand shielding his eyes from the cool sun. Doctor John Smith had come upon the great hollowed world as well. Smiling toward her he put out his hand.

"Are you going the same way I am?" he asked.

She turned toward the road which led to what she sought, nodded and stretched her hand stiffly toward the man. Smith was the sort she avoided.

It was part of why she'd come to the spider-lands.

The walk toward her destiny was but three hours away. They could have taken a vehicle but penance demanded a certain sacrifice. And it would give her time to think.

The pair of them started walking.

"So." The word hung in the air.

"You understand I think," she said.

An hour had passed. The other occupants of the hollowed ship had gone toward strange miracles or were swimming in rivers of fog. Only the two of them had turned toward the hills.

There was a tomb-monolith there, and the Treave.

It was the tomb she sought.

As for the doctor? He sought out the Treave.

There were many races upon Haxaires, though collectively they were called the Tisab-Ting, just as despite all the different races of men the term humanity still somehow clung to each of them.

There were the Kharnelorn, the Emgrialith and the Treave, scorpion women and malachite-skinned women and women with skin like that of stone or glass.

Each was different and each unique yet all of them were as unlike mankind as a man was unlike a virus burning in his veins.

And some confused the difference between to be an ascension as if Haxaires were closer to Edens that have never been . . .

After an hour's walking they rested beside a scarlet tree. The branches were lined with small mouths but the pair were not worried. Other concerns took up the burdens of their time.

The woman shielding her eyes with her hands kept looking ahead of her. Her hair was cut short exactly the way her order demanded. Her garments were simple, black and formal, and this mattered because it was out of place here.

One did not wear dark clothes in the desert to sweat a remnant of their life away. She hadn't even brought water with her. He had offered but she refused.

Smith himself wore the traditional clothing of the Treave, a violet tunic leaving bare his arms and legs. The only human thing with him was a small black bag, an affectation from an earlier time.

Inside the bag were all the attributes a surgeon might need.

As she stared ahead John stared behind.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked casually but the casualness held a subtle rigid edge.

"Out there," she said, "are a people who have no lust in their hearts, no words for sex . . . or sin."

"They know about sin," he said. "They don't believe in it, but they love hearing about it."

As he smiled, she turned back to him.

"We have corrupted them," she said. "We have ruined them. But there is an oasis out there where they do not leave. I've heard about it."

"As have I," he said.

"They do not ever leave their home. And when they wish to atone, they use Atesli'lai."

"You've heard of that?" he asked. She had mentioned it before but in the small talk a tourist might make when discussing the pyramids. One knows the pyramids are there but unless one knows what the pyramids are for the knowledge is subtly empty.

"I told you I wish to seek this out. I wish Atlesli'lai with them."

"Who is your contact?" he asked.

"Ranin Cirr."

"Ah." He rose then, listening to the whispering sounds of the branches as they swam past his head, unconsciously avoiding them, allowing them only to catch and devour the air.

"Well, you may find what you seek. I am going among the Treave to find what I seek."

"Do you not believe that one must atone for their sins?" she asked as they continued on their way.

"That depends."

"Depends on that?"

"On what they feel they need to atone for."

The road slowly moved ahead of them; the rough rivers of padded stone eroded by the tread of a trillion feet over a billion years.

"I believe that everyone must atone," she said. "I believe everyone has to seek amends."

"Surely your God does this for you."

She looked at him. "*My God*," not "*our God*." She was right. He believed in nothing.

"God provides of course, but if we were to stand in the presence of angels would they not show us the way?"

"Is that what the Tisab-Ting are to you then? Angels?"

"They possess neither male nor female natures beyond the ability to give birth. I have seen no signs of war or destruction across their world. Before we came were they not innocent, trusting, absolved?"

"They did accidentally almost kill a man when he came among them," Dr. Smith said. "Hardly innocent. Ignorant, I'll give you that. But not innocent."

"Not innocent anymore," she said. "Surely, you've noticed that the Tisab-Ting have been made aware of gender. Of male and female. Of sex. Surely that it is a terrible thing."

Dr. Smith glanced at the rose agate-coloured sky a time, then turned to her.

"Why?" he asked simply.

"It is the destruction of their civilization," she said. "It is the apple. It is the serpent."

"I always liked snakes," the doctor said. He reached into his bag and pulled out an apple. "Want half?" he asked.

Scowling she shook her head.

"We cannot allow a civilization to perish like this. I have heard they have even been introduced to pornography."

"It's ironic," the doctor said, ignoring the last point for the moment, "that you would complain about the change of a civilization."

"Ironic? Why?"

"Religion has always changed society. Altered it. Shaped it. Some of the Tisab-Ting believe in a deity called Yathlan that created Haxaires by laying an egg, and from her body took small pieces of herself and arrayed them here, creating the various races."

"A creation myth," the priest replied.

"Exactly. A myth. Yathlan is no more real than any other deity. Now we can debate which deity is right or wrong, or just mention there's no sign of the planet being . . . hatched, and go from there. Of course, Yathlan exists in various myths. Like among the Treave . . ."

She stopped him then.

"I know about the Treave," she said.

"I imagine you do if it's Atesli'lai you seek."

They walked on in silence for a time.

"Why did you become a doctor?" she asked finally, to avoid the silence that had grown up between them.

"The money," he casually replied. "Plus, the old joke."

"Joke?"

"What's the difference between God and a doctor? God knows he's not a doctor."

The man smiled a moment then knew it wasn't funny, to her.

"Apple?" he asked again.

"No," she said.

"Alright, why did you become a priest?"

"I wanted to do the right thing," she said. "I wanted to know I was always doing the right thing so that I'd never have to worry over making mistakes."

"Sounds selfish," he said.

"How that can be selfish?" she asked.

"Well, why do you think you should be allowed to always be right? Why can't someone else be right? Doesn't it put a lot of stress on someone always imagining they're doing the right thing?"

"God offered us forgiveness," she said.

"Well, if God says you're forgiven what are you doing here?"

The question stung her a moment.

"Merely being forgiven is worthless unless one seeks atonement."

"That doesn't sound right," he said. "Sounds very irreligious. I know." He stopped. "As your doctor I prescribe three good deeds, asking forgiveness, singing hymns to annoy the Treave and a journey home. You're cured. My bill."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a blank slip of paper. He handed this to the priest.

She didn't take it. Instead, she turned and kept on walking.

With the doctor behind her, she asked offhandedly, "Do you always mock your patients?"

"Only when they don't take my advice," he said.

The pair of them kept walking.

There was a fork in the road. The right path turned toward the tomb-monolith she wished to go to. The left path was toward a Treave village.

"Well. I guess we part here," he said.

She was about to go when the doctor reached into his bag and pulled something out. It was several sheets of paper. He handed it to her.

"Before you go," he said, "read this."

There was a sheer wall of stone between the paths and the paths cut into the hills. Considering this to be the last time she saw him she glanced at the pages, and slowly read them.

It was a treatise written by a Tisab-Ting named Isylea. It began as follows.

"If, as the humans believe there are demons, and if, as the humans believe, demons punish people for crimes then they are just beings and hell's ultimate purpose is to make sure the guilty are punished.

"Perhaps hell exists only to allow one to seek amends.

"As for heaven, perhaps its role is to allow one the chance to see the faults they've made in life for if one can be, as some humans believe, perfect in heaven, perhaps this may allow them to see their flaws properly.

"And if one can see their flaws in a perfect state, would it not be perfection to go and find those in hell, to save them, while those in hell seek atonement, to reach heaven? Perhaps one does not arrive in a set place but merely wanders around.

"Or perhaps, as I have heard it said, their world is hell."

"What is this supposed to mean?" she asked.

"It was something a Tisab-Ting wrote about heaven and

hell," the doctor said. "A different point of view I guess although it's similar to something a playwright from long ago once wrote. I guess there's only so many ideas in the universe."

She handed the pages back to him. Without another word, she turned and walked up the path toward her destiny.

Dr. Smith shrugged and turned the other way.

Ranin Cirr observed the priest as she approached. Sightlessly Ranin watched her come and with a telepathic beckoning call, she came to the exact spot in the wall where the worm writhing serpentlike lay.

They had relayed messages to one another over many days.

There was an odd affinity in their union. This band of Tisab-Ting had remained apart, cut off while many others had allowed themselves to scatter between two worlds. But she had found an oddly kindred soul in Ranin Cirr.

The beings here linked themselves to the Treave. There in the nearby valley, the Treave existed, slender-limbed beings going about their days. Like all life in the spider-lands they would give birth.

But they would not lay eggs.

They were descended from a species of mites. Small thin dark bodies moved across the cities like shadow-laden ghosts and when the time came for one of them to conceive their young a clutch of daughters would slowly devour their mothers from within and then escape into the naked world beyond to perpetuate the cycle of being and unbeing.

The Tisab-Ting knew the moment of birth would lead to the inescapable horror of death and some among their number, in wishing to atone and feel some semblance of forgiveness, allowed themselves to bond with the Treave in this time of their dying.

Now the priest would bond with one as well.

Ranin Cirr felt the deep longing inside her to atone.

There was a strong complimentary kinship in this.

For her, the need to atone stemmed from when she was an

infant. They had found within her another form, born with a child inside her. That child had died.

It was a rarity but it happened. And the need to atone sprang not simply from this but the realization that were she to have come here, were she to have been born here in the spider-lands the child would have lived, would have been a natural thing.

Of course, seeking to atone for actions or inactions before one could think, before one could reason or plot or seek malice or seek revenge or talk . . . one could consider any actions made to be those of an innocent.

As for Ranin Cirr?

Whatever crime Cirr wished to atone from she understood, but understood the way a blind man might understand colour. Though the sensation of their guilt was identical.

And they settled then, floating out across the dim scarlet deserts and laid upon the body of a woman about to die.

She felt the cool sensation of young bodies within her and knew in the passing of their birth they would pass the thin wall of her skin and she would feel the terror and torment of dying and in that stranger's death, would be absolved.

Then she would spend the rest of her days teaching Ranin Cirr and the others assembled here how good they were. How noble. How perfect was the nature of their angelic being.

The Treave woman was slumped against a wall, her body writhing uncontrollably as certain serpents might. Then in the dusk, a figure stood over her and laid her on her back.

"Easy now," the voice said and she realized she knew the voice. It was the doctor. Quietly he worked as she suddenly screamed *No* and a small incision was made of a scalpel's blade that had never existed here before. Carefully he laid the infants out, each of them crying as the hot air burnt softly into their lungs and the pain made victims of their bodies.

But they were alive.

And the priest knew then in that moment her chance for atonement was done as the Treave was slowly brought up to a

seated position and John Smith smiled at her and whispered she would be alright. In a few days, she would be ready to live the rest of her life.

And this had never occurred to the priest, that the woman they took possession of might want to live. With a righteous sigh, she turned back toward the village of the Treave then put her hand to the wall of the tomb-monolith, and softly wept.

THE FACES OF A CAT

It is strange to know I can see everyone's faces but my own. I do know my face, but cannot show it in the company of *them*, so here on their world, it remains a mystery, even to myself.

I wear a mask, an organic resin which simulates their appearance. Besides my face, I must also wear clothing. Such strange dead things they wear. They even seem to *appreciate* wearing it. When they cannot wear clothing and are among others of their kind, they either grope together for intimacy or shy away as if from too hot a warmth.

I have a name. I have three names. There is the name of the people, that we all possess. Then there is my name. I am Echeldlya of Sparrow. I choose the name partly from a creature known to them, a creature native to their world.

Then there is the name I use for their benefit. Among them, I am simply Sparrow.

They are strange. They look like the people, except they are rounded, their flesh is less angular than ours. They have a name for us, of sorts. They say we are like cats. I have seen the creatures they describe, soft-footed and lithe, and we are similar to them, except the faces of a cat will not drive them mad.

Our faces; that is the sticking point between the people and them. That is why I must forget my face until I am among my own, why I wear this skin I cannot feel, this numb space across my features, distorting them to something else, something less.

I go among them, upon their steel lattices, into the earth that they call subways, bustling amongst them, never entirely certain why. The people have been here now for years, and some I have been told about, seem to enjoy their world. I am not among those numbers. I never was.

Yet I linger here.

I am an artist. I paint from memory the places of my home. I have painted the violet spires and cliffs set against the Mulirietaja Sea, which they have called the Turquoise Sea, and I

have set to ink and painted the rose-pearl colours of the sky above the deserts of Heldneia, which they call the Rusted Desert. I do not know why they should change a simple name to one so complicated.

I am respected in my profession, I believe. My paintings sell, especially among them, and I have done more than landscapes. I have done portraits.

There is some "alchemy," (that is a term they use,) in our features which renders an image harmless. I have created portraits of those I know who still dwell in the countries of my home, and they too have sold very well.

Yet here in this place, among them, I cannot paint portraits, even from memory. And when I gaze at my paintings, I cannot remember their faces.

And in all this to protect them. All this I've done to protect . . . *them*.

It happened in the time they call autumn. I was in my studio, staring at a painting for some minutes when I noticed the window. My studio is wide and bare and the streets below are littered with them while the people also walk by.

And in the reflection, I saw my mask and ached to know this lingered along my skin. Subconsciously, I picked at it, my fingernails digging at the edges of the mask, but stopped myself, staring at the rough edges I had made. Have to have that fixed, I decided. I left.

In the elevator, a person stood next to me as we descended to the ground floor. He noticed the edges of my face and I noticed the smooth features of his own. Idly he spoke.

"Are you Sparrow?" he asked.

"I am Echeldlya of Sparrow," I said.

"I see."

He seemed uncertain. I marvelled at that. Had he lived so long among them he didn't recognize a proper name?

"What is your name?" I asked.

"I am Peter," he said.

"What is your name, of the people?" I continued, as the elevator slid swiftly to the ground.

"Peter is the name I was born with," he said simply as the doors opened and he left. He was born here. He had never lived in a proper world.

I went out past the foyer into the street and continued along, the strange garments they called a dress clinging to me. Peter had turned the corner in the opposite direction and was gone. I did not feel much like speaking to him now anyway.

As I crossed the street an idle thought struck me. I could peel the face away that they gave me and stare at them, and watch them go mad. I had never painted such a thing before. I marvelled at the simplicity of the thought. Then I saw her.

She was wearing a black lace veil and she was desperately trying to avoid their eyes. I had seen them do this from time to time and I idly followed. She wore a black dress, but I was certain she was one of them. If only one deserved to see my face, she did.

I watched as she avoided each eye, the people's and theirs, and once when the wind was unusually fierce, she tightly clung to her veil, so tightly I was astonished at the strength. But it didn't matter, or wouldn't matter soon.

The street I followed led to a park and the park was green tumbling bright scarlet. Some of the plants were from a proper world, some native here. My fingers itched under the mask and I watched her bump into a young thing, one of them, and she apologized and he nodded in understanding and asked if she needed help.

"No, no, I'm fine, just heading to my doctor," she said.

"Want me to walk with you?"

He was tall, blocklike, with blond cropped hair wearing a shirt almost the colour of home, and she shook her head and continued on her way. I followed without apologizing as the young thing looked longingly after her.

A bus stop neared. She got on and I followed. I wondered how long it would take to remove the skin, to present myself as I truly was. My fingers itched some more.

She got off and I followed and I decided the time had come. The street deserted itself here at some familiar spot and I called to her and she turned back, and I tore off my face.

I expected some groan, some maddening scream but her shoulders sank and that was all. I felt oddly vindicated to be free and disappointed she wasn't writhing in agony. Then, my fingers itching still more tore at her veil and as it gave way I saw. I was staring at the window behind her and so finally could I see my own face. Then I saw hers and realized I was staring at the face of a person.

She grabbed her veil and I knew where she had been heading. To this place, to have a new face made.

"What were you trying to do?" she asked me suddenly. "This morning it cracked. It had been poorly made but they didn't know until now. I had to travel half the city veiled to make sure nobody got hurt. What exactly were you trying to do?"

I stammered and then quickly replaced the artificial skin over my own features.

She looked at me with such abject sadness that I felt something, shame perhaps, or some twisting sensation of guilt. Then, after making sure my face was now hidden, making sure no one had been injured she glanced about at the empty street and walked into the building where they'd replace her face for her.

I felt the rough edges of the mask, looked at myself in a mirror, suddenly ashamed to see even this portion of myself visible, sat on the street corner awhile, then turned and went inside.

At the elevator was a man, smiling at me. And I got in and he asked which floor.

"Fifth," I said.

"I know you. Aren't you Echeldlya of Sparrow?"

I looked at the man in mild surprise then nodded.

"It's nice to meet you," he said.

BISON

They took the last bison and sent him off-world. Same for all the other creatures threatened by us. Heard the last elephants were taken to some planet we can't see, to make sure they will be safe of course.

Eventually, it will just be the cockroaches, the parasites, the plagues and ourselves. At that point, one or the other is going to find a way to exile us from Earth too, send us off to some pristine Eden to defile and leave the Earth to slowly heal in the hands of things we mistake for vermin.

MARSUPIAL LIONS

You can find marsupial lions on some Earths you know. Evolution took a different path so striped bodies of great beasts are there, giant sloths, and sharks the size of whaling ships.

Tourists come occasionally, to watch marsupial lions raising their young on an Australia which was never impressed upon by a single human foot, until the coming of the tourists of course.

Several Earths exist like this, empty of us.

But there is always an alternate we can't reach.

I often thought about that.

I think there are Earths where not only did we not exist but are extinct, not merely never being but were and are no more.

If so, perhaps whatever creatures are there, if they are wiser than ourselves, open the doors as we have done, send their tourists invisible as ourselves, watch us as we tend our young, or war or murder or play, marvelling at the absurdity we are still here somehow, as we marvel at the absurdity of marsupial lions.

What the lions marvel at I haven't thought of yet.

THE BALLAD OF ROLAND DARLEIGH

Ate his last rations a day ago and gazed at the mountain again.

Beyond the base of the grey spire was a vast jungle. Purple leaves bordered each side, which grasped and hungrily tried to plunge small thorns into his palms.

Gazed into the foliage and heard dragons dreaming.

They prowled the twilight undergrowth devouring everything when awake. But judging by piles of bleached bones the creatures were in slumber now. Feared when they would stir.

Arrived a day ago through a small gap in the world above. Had been pursuing a murderer across a barren northern valley and there between mountains on one side and mountains on the other he'd followed John Marson to the unseen gap where both men fell.

Marson broke his neck but Roland was luckier; slid down the mountainside while his screaming quarry was thrown clear of the only safe road into the hidden world below.

Roland had no reason to bring him to justice now.

First day he explored. Here was a lush paradise save the dragons and devouring leaves. The world below all took an orange tint from the ceiling above, giving an eerie orange light, like the ghosts of fire.

Besides leaves and dragons there were women made of smoke.

They passed clean through trees, white and sinuous, their robes composed of faces he could afterward not recall. Tried to feed on him but couldn't. When Marson arrived a few lit on him like moths and Roland watched his quarry's scar-lined face copied upon their garments. The murderer was devoured by them.

Had to escape.

Began to climb, but first took everything Marson had; knife used to kill Miranda Cole, specked with blood, length of rope used to kill Jack Murton. Needn't nothing else.

Grey spire was a pyramid rounded on all sides. With the knife slowly began to drag himself up looking for handholds, making what he couldn't find. As he climbed women of smoke clustered about him.

Felt their faces pressed behind him. Were he to fall they'd feast.

He spit into the grey stone and kept on moving.

By halfway point was exhausted. Mountain seemed to go forever; knew wasn't so. Now easily a hundred feet up but when gazed up seemed he hadn't moved. When he closed his eyes felt wind passing against the rocky face, listening ever so subtly wind flowed faster higher he went. It was an illusion from them. They kept growing in number, trying to make him despair.

Kept on going.

Didn't look up but kept his ears open, wind his guide.

Hand gripped spire's peak.

Looked up. Turned back behind him. Storm of them were trying desperately to make him fall. When first encountered they expected some terror on his part. Others, if there had been others, ran screaming.

He had not.

In the clearing he sat and when one roared silently still sat, waiting for death. He had stood upon the tundra and felt bones break from the horror of the ice, fought a bear where no man walks and when the beast retired, her face cut, he felt no anger to her and he suspected she felt no anger to him. He braved walking in a storm to save Margaret Rowl, the butcher's daughter when she needed medicine. So, he was not afraid of them, no matter how terrifying they seemed.

Above him was a hole, two feet out of reach. He took the rope, tied it to a noose and threw it out into the world he knew. Gripped something first try as hundreds pressed against him, impotently filled with rage, as he dragged himself into his own world again.

He was on an autumnal field with trees in all directions. Hole was a few feet from him now beside a stone where the noose gripped tight. Grabbed a long stick and poked the ground after his breathing slowed. Saw the hole behind him and poked ahead, noting solid ground in all directions.

Then started walking.

Had no food. Trek home was too far away. He'd die on the trail far from everyone. As he passed out of the valley caught a glimpse of his wife wearing that white dress, waiting by the porch for him. He must look a terrible sight now, his black beard streaked with mud, blue eyes hollowed slightly.

Felt a terrible hunger and knew how long he could stay alive.

As he crossed into the borderlands saw a few traces of smoke in the distance.

Flatlands were far from the tree line. Moving in rhythm with sound of his heart, he grew slowly weaker. Never make it. Knew it.

Kept on walking anyway.

Didn't know when he collapsed. One moment was walking toward cabins in the distance, next was in the hidden world again. Saw women of smoke coming, heard dragons howling, and knew they were all coming for him.

Didn't run. Drew his gun and then waited as he saw women drawing to him. Came as a great wave through the trees. Had a few shots. It would be quick if he'd put the gun to his temple and fired, but did not.

Standing at the base of the spire when they came felt himself dissolve away in their company, pale into their wraith-flesh, imagining he was dead. But he was not beaten yet.

Flexed muscles which did not exist and felt one of them struggle a moment, and then no more. He pulled at her and she sighed, then screamed. He had walked the storm, fought tooth and claw, had seen a day that lasted six months long and watched

his own thoughts grow twisted in the loneliness of a day which would never seem to end.

He was not done yet. The woman screamed and then he felt himself vomited up . . .

Slammed into the door of a cabin and fell. Door opened and an old slightly man looked out, saw the officer there, his red uniform tattered, and with the help of two strong sons drew him inside.

He was half-delirious. They tended to him, as did the old man's daughter and his wife. Lying on a bed he mumbled about grey women and that night the family wondered what to do. Would be easy to kill him. No one need know. Season had been hard and a gun, knife, and clothes, could be theirs.

"I don't know," his oldest said, "I don't like the look of him. I think if we killed him, he'd come back."

So, they healed him.

Five days later he was home again, alive and well, to find his wife dead. Had died while he was away. Fever, the doctor said. A lesser man would have wailed or panicked but he just mounted his horse and turned north. He knew what he was doing, he said. He had someplace to go. But he'd be coming back. With his wife. He had someplace to be.

But he'd be coming back.

THE BURIED CITY

A man built a city none had ever seen or imagined before.
Without a trace, it vanished.

We have his blueprints; a massive city arranged to look like five limbs radiating out in an oddly familiar manner. Some claimed it appears like a starfish though one of the limbs is shorter than the others.

Have his expenses, a list of building materials, yet, they seem a fraction of what one would need. Shown in loving detail he wanted a metallic sheen for his miniature world but interiors were in something he called still-clay. Seems to have made no purchases for this clay, whatever it was.

And as I said we have his blueprints and know the city was indeed built, its location a mystery. On eve of his triumph, after drawing in so many to his cause, the city was swallowed in an earthquake, leaving no trace, until now.

Biographical details first.

Spent the last twenty years trying to understand him.
Definition of an enigma. No record of birth or early years. Just appeared one wintry day, cold and driven. Driven to what would not become readily apparent.

Not until now.

Hard to gauge a man across the gulf of history. Can only garner the barest details and fill the gaps with what you suspect. In his case even more difficult because, though he left documents behind, they make little sense.

He was obsessed with love and death and believed these twin desires lay at the root of human misery.

I have the exact quote.

"For so be it a man, as is much as he can seek heaven, must feel the icy grip of death, his only solace the touch of another's warmth . . . still-clay of a lover to stave off the end.

"However, if these desires could be stalled what sort of

better man could we find?"

The architect spent his entire life trying to create a better man.

I'm on a train going to the site of the lost city. Green fields are clicking by and on my lap is this leatherbound notebook written in his hand. After he first appeared he moved east, south and west, and wherever he went drew magnetically people to him.

Methodically recorded their names. I have a list of twenty thousand people, with descriptions of their appearance, and where they met him. It is an epitaph.

I have this record of his utopia but there are details he omits. The city's population should be two thousand but are ten times that, making the superfluous people a second mystery.

I say second because the first has been asked.

What did he build his city with?

The site has been active for some time now. Green fields are burst open, wound of the scarred earth revealed. Because of my involvement, I was invited to a first glimpse at the discovery. The location had not been revealed. And afterward . . . no one must know where the burial site is.

I climb down into the grave writ long. Shake hands with the lead archeologist who claims, based on what he's seen the city suffered no earthquake. Surprised I ask what happened. It was buried.

Buildings are metallic, five monoliths five storeys tall. He had requested metal. I understand now.

This was the insect skin of his perfect skeleton.

The door to the building is just being cleared of dirt now, can see the door's familiar parchment quality . . . they back away. A few men vomit. I stagger to the ground and then regain myself. Have a terrible thought of being buried alive. I stifle it. Have to see more.

Three others agree, the archeologist and his two sons. Note

terror in their eyes, imagine terror in my own. I realize these men are used to the dead.

They have no experience with this.

Inside are chairs. Table. Doors. People. The chairs are old, and the doors ornate. I could imagine they were oak, fashioned to this . . . design.

We take out some chairs, a table, its legs broken, and a few demolished lamps. Try to think over the man I knew, but can't. His vision is written here yet even with his words I couldn't see it.

Don't know how he managed . . . this. Suppose this was why the city of his perfection was buried. *Alive*.

Can describe a chair if you want; an old design, long elegant legs curling out, prim back, strangely coloured. But I can't describe the moan she makes.

Written on the chair is a woman's face, stretched taunt. There's a face etched on the door too, and lamps have faces at the source of heat. Take great comfort there is no source of heat in them anymore.

The woman is still begging for her husband.

Can't imagine the man I knew could conceive this.

We are leading these pieces out, day after day; must find a way to bring them back or end their suffering.

The worst part was at the heart of the city we found the architect turned into a living statue, dedicated to his own glory.

And after a hundred years of being buried underground, a hundred years of agony, his first question was, "Why do I still hear screaming? What are all these people screaming about?"

PARASITE

I am not human anymore. I can talk, but fundamentally I am not human. And my parents did this to me.

It is impossible to express the beginning. I can try but since language did not exist in my thoughts before I have only vague impressions, vague sensations. I remember heat, cold, light, dark, remember the world as a great clock running to a perfect rhythm and any time I was not where I was meant to be I panicked. *Often.*

Faces then. Either I always knew them but regarded them as nothing, or never knew they were faces to begin with.

Then came the parasite.

I remember blunt sensation of triangular serrated teeth probing back of my neck.

A voice came clear finally.

"The procedure is working."

Yes, I remember that voice very clearly.

I was in the dark and the cold and later realized it was an operating table and still later realized what they had done, but at the start, there was just cold and dark and serrated teeth and pain.

They had not bothered to give me painkillers.

I think I screamed.

Ah, but afterward world started to come into focus.

"What is my name?" the woman asked. For my entire life before she was a distorted image, but now I could see her, and her name? Yes, I'd heard her name.

"Mother," I said. She smiled.

And the man, older, greyer, same question, different answer.

"Father," I said.

So. I was supposedly cured. They sent us home shortly after.

Their home was a large palatial estate. As I walked through ivory-white doors, suddenly the words came clear. Ivory, white, palatial. I was suddenly standing atop the hills of Rome, wandering among columns bleached white, a representation of that word.

Suddenly an elephant wandered past across the threshold, shrinking and growing as my parents passed clean through it.

"We'll take you to your room," she said.

There was a staircase which curled upward like an ammonite shell, and in ancient waters was a glittering spiral pulsating out small tentacles as we reached the top, and I was shown my room, as if for the first time.

It was surprisingly spartan. A great rounded shield of bronze slowly rolled along the hall.

A bed, a desk, a notebook atop it, pale and white, and I was left alone.

"He seems so much better now," I distinctly heard her say.

"Almost perfect," the man echoed.

And glancing at the mirror I saw perfection. I saw myself, not as I was, not as I had been, but their image of me as perfect. I was successful and powerful, the family business suddenly mine and a woman by my side, young, and attractive. I wasn't sure if this was my mother's view of perfection or my father's. I turned from the full-length mirror to my bed, its grey sheets like the dark womb of an ocean, and softly drifted to sleep amid the rocking of the waves.

Further I dreamed further outward the dream became. Was standing on a field, knowing I was four, seeing an image of a field, tall grass about, tall trees in the distance, each word, grass, trees, blossoming outward like a painting that never lessened the deeper one looked into it.

Hurt myself, slammed hands into rough earth and pain shot through my memories. Suddenly was lying on the operating table and could see what had been done to me. It had to show me.

That was its purpose after all.

The worm was barely six inches long, less than half an inch thick. My head had been turned to my right side and the small worm bore into me. Then I stepped backward in time.

Saw it taken from my neck to the small tray, from the tray to a small aquarium, where in the murky silence I saw countless others softly swim. They darted across dim waters feeding on memories forced into them. The one inside me showed me what they were.

They were created to be a library condensed to flesh. Now, I had such a library within. I needed only to think of a word and it became real to me.

Love. I was watching Romeo and Juliet, though I heard a correction. *Doomed love*, something in my thoughts said.

History. I stood before a cave in France watching the first paintings of a bison preserved. I sped forward, and backward, each image furthering the next and the next and the next; Rome, Carthage, New York, Shaka, Roosevelt, Enheduanna, my parents.

My parents.

I had an image of them, their lives spread out like fine gossamer webs. Saw their first meeting, their marriage, and my birth. Saw them around me, saw them as they saw myself. Saw them plan this cure for me.

I replayed the word love but no image of them came. Replayed in my mind hate, disdain, or grief . . . nothing of theirs showed through. There was just an empty void and their need to “fix” me bled into everything else.

The parasite seemed to understand. After all, it had been “fixed” as well, turned into something unnatural to its kind. It thought like a man now, like the way a human being would.

I awoke.

I can stare into the mirror and day by day I grow stronger. I listen to their conversations, I laugh, I cry, but I only do all this because of the small parasite growing inside me. And sometimes late at night, I have a dreadful fear that the self I had is being slowly devoured, that each day it takes over and I am rendered

less and less until I won't remember ever being anything but what *it* is, a small worm using me as a marionette and a mask for itself, pretending to be human because it was tortured into being that way, until my name will become nothing but a blank void, the history of myself obliterated and washed over by the history it has taken from me and of me, my life eroded into the shape it has consumed into being.

And the saddest part is my parents couldn't care less.

They always wanted a son like it to call their own.

THE AGE OF THE TEN SUNS

I am reminded of this story from my childhood. In the great time before the world did not have one sun. The great falcon of the air, the great winged, sun-feathered falcon which lit the world was not a single creature, but one of ten.

Usually only one "sun" was allowed to spin in the sky a single day and then depart, allowing the next to rise in turn, until all ten days passed, and then the first was allowed to ascend the sky again.

However, the suns discussed among themselves how selfish it was that the world could not experience the full light of their warmth and so one day all ten suns lit into the sky. The ground began to blacken, the oceans to boil until a hero, blessed by the gods, took his arrows and notching his bow slew nine suns, and saved the universe.

But he still had to kill nine suns to do it.

They are a ravenous flood, a hunger. Initially, they were confined to a single world. Down upon the salt-etched seas, they clung to the sides of rocks like small leeches waiting to be freed.

Small pale bodies like maggots lined the inner seas while rocky, bronze-touched stones littered the outlying jagged continents, like sentinels, watching prisoners in their cages. When discovered, at first, at the very first, the crew mistook the monsters.

The creatures seemed harmless after all. Tiny wormlike things, unable to leave the confines of their small inverted isles, the warm waters their prisons, unable to step upon the land.

One can see the man then. He is tanned, warm, naked to the waist, smiling, and talking to a red-haired woman by the shore. He plunges into the water and then rises. Such an innocuous thing, and yet this is the moment it happened.

The creatures, a small number of them, invaded his flesh. Invisibly they bore into his skin, his spinal column, and began to rewrite him. After a few seconds they were finished and the

masquerade was complete. He returned to the ship and that night, one by one he brought the others down to the water where their very souls, their essences were fed upon.

And for the first time, they articulated their names. They spoke to the night air, to the wind, to the jagged sentinels, and then slowly became aware of what they were. Shortly thereafter the ship left. Carrying eight billion beasts with them.

They came to the nearest inhabited world, a silent flood, a stillborn epidemic needing but the touch of flesh to be resurrected into life.

The man who before had been Sojan Wynar arrived at the softly sleeping village, nestled in the blue hills. The woman who before had been Geila Kesliath arrived at the great city of grey stone, nestled by the river.

Men and women silently slipped out into the night and along the dark dim roads would meet people passing by.

A simple shake of the hand would be enough to let a few stray strands of white cancer cling to their flesh, and seconds later they too would be devoured.

"How are you tonight?" a man might ask, and the one who had been Sojan would smile, gaze into the night, mention the stars looked different, (though he had never really seen the stars before,) mention how strange the thick, closed-off forest seemed, and how it was not like the white sky of a seemingly empty world.

And the man might smile, mention his own origin, some world of ice, to which Sojan might reply he would love to visit it one day. Then the shaking of hands and Sojan would pass on as the man's features shifted and changed and all echo of who he was, was gone.

The dim dark roads swam with them that night, as Geila sang by window sills awakening sleeping children who, wiping sleep from their eyes asked who she was. She smiling explained she was a friend, someone to take them to a better place.

Then a kiss upon the brow and the children in their beds went to sleep and never woke again, even as the next day small

bodies rose, laughing to be born at last, again.

In one night, they had consumed a world.

And I awoke.

In the morning, I stumbled from my sleep and gazed upon a world which seemed exactly like the world I had known before.

I walked the blue vales, sat by the river and painted sun-stained fish on a canvas of bronze. I heard a noise, looked up and was greeted by Mr. Pahlen coming toward me. He looked oddly refreshed, oddly alert, his large body somehow lightened. I continued to paint as he crossed by, then stared back, strangely at me.

"How was your sleep?" he asked.

"I slept well. You?"

"Oh, I slept like a baby." He smiled then and was about to cross down the road when he stopped.

"What did you dream of?" he asked.

"I dreamed of nothing," I replied and continued painting.

"Nothing? You did not dream of the shallow seas?"

"No," I continued to focus on the fish, then noticed they had paused. The fish were looking at me from the skin of the river, their golden scales rippling with discontent.

I stared down at the grass. The grass looked up at me.

Far away, beyond where my senses could lead me, the one known as Sojan paused, confused at words he did not understand.

"Are you alright my friend?" Mr. Pahlen asked.

"I'm fine," I said and then went over to a nearby stone. He followed and without thinking he drew out his hand. I took it, shook it, for no real reason, and then glanced at the sunrise.

Nothing happened.

"Are you now with us?" he asked.

"Well of course I am," I replied, "I'm here on this stone, aren't I?" I felt the smooth rock like a low-leaning chair, and suddenly he looked strangely confused as if my words he could not understand.

Beneath my skin, I felt small bodies burn. I glanced down

at my hand to see small white maggotlike creatures burn, charred and black, out of my palm, falling to the naked ground below.

"Well, what do you make of that?" I asked.

He stared at me, stricken, afraid. I went over to the canvas and knew something was wrong with it.

"You know," I said, "I think the perspective's wrong. If I redo it from the point of view of the fish it might be better."

"What are you?" he asked, and the grass echoed the words.

"I am the man now I've always been. Care to sit down? I think perhaps the two of us should talk."

"Perhaps you should begin by explaining what you are."

"I am a being not native to this world. I am a creature long imprisoned behind ancient walls you could not comprehend. I was there in the dark and the warm endless surf of waves I cannot describe, until I was freed, one among many. One among a multitude."

"And what do you want?"

"I want to survive, to live, to feel the warmth of a trillion suns across my new face. Our new faces. Before I did not have skin like this, a body like this. Before I was something else, alien, though a portion of me survives even as I appear as I do now.

"I want to know what it is to feel. I never knew before. I want to feel so much, the grass, the trees, the river. Each naked body in its ecstasy. I want to expand outward and let these new senses take hold of me, become so much greater than I was before."

"Are you a danger to us?"

"I do not know. I do not know what it is you are, what it is you want."

"I want to feel. There is so much I wish to do, to bring all life together, a harmony of all things as one."

"You do know there is a difference between feeling and harmony."

"Not so great a difference I think."

"If you truly wish to feel why not feel what it is to kill? I am here, as are you. Let us see who is stronger. Put it to the test. You or me, or the old bright world the two of us are standing on."

"Yes, that would be best. That would be the only way to know which one of us deserves to live."

"And you would certainly learn the distinction between feeling and harmony."

Across the world, the battle raged. The grass shook and the people swayed. Children wept, old men dreamed, while there within their bodies the creatures panicked, screamed, and wept, as some force equalled or greater than their own stretched forth dark fingers and began to crush them all.

And when it was finished Mr. Pahen panted fitfully, finally upon the grass, as I asked if their people had any other ships, if any of them had left their world besides these few refugees.

"No, we are the only ones," he said. And in mourning the trees sang then, warm and soft and mild, as I crossed to my canvas, and finished my painting though I noticed all the fish in the river were dead.

"*The time of ten suns*," I said, admiring my creation. I then glanced at the dying man, made an ancient prayer, and knew when the next ship came, I would be the only survivor left. I did not know what lie to tell beyond that I had saved the world, perhaps the universe.

But I had not done it for them.